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The Forbidden Garden

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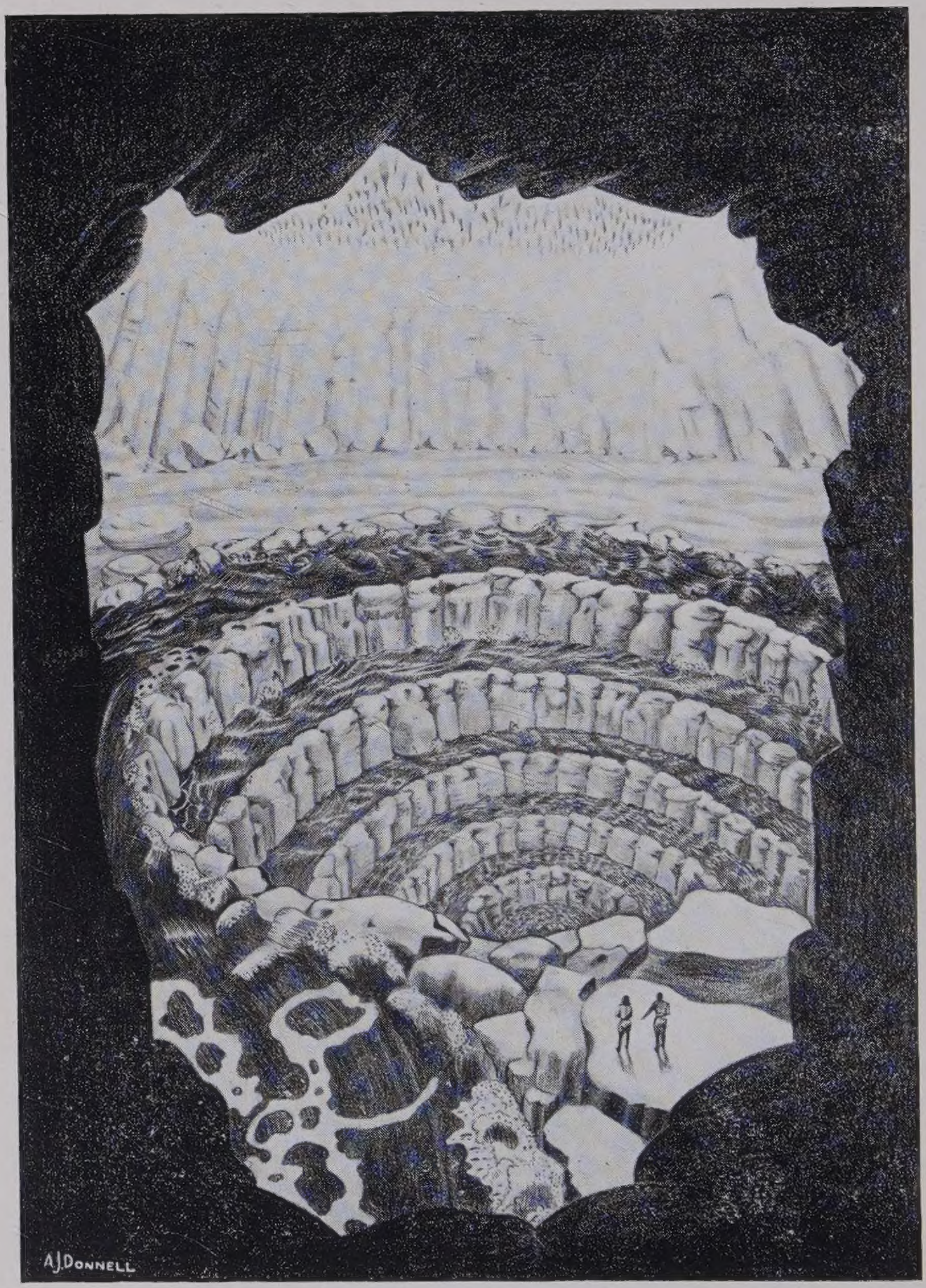

They had eyes only for the vaulted ceiling of the stupendous chamber. A full thousand feet above them soared the flaming spans of jagged rock, arched over the glowing bowl three miles or more in diameter into which the river rushed.

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1947

JOHN TAINE

The Forbidden Garden

Eric Temple Bell

Illustrated by A. J. Donnell

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They had eyes only for the vaulted ceiling of the stupendous chamber. A full thousand feet above them soared the flaming spans of jagged rock, arched over the glowing bowl three miles or more in diameter, into which the river rushed. (Page 173) . . . . . Frontispiece

"It is sadder than a will," she said. "Even the saddest will usually makes some one happier—after a time. It is like the farewell of a leper before he is banished to a living death. Will you read it, Mr. Vartan?" 36

The exquisite creatures were half resting, half flying on his outstretched fingers and palms. Lost in their perfect grace and airy beauty, he did not try to speculate on their visit to this inaccessible chasm of the mountains. . . . 94

"They grow in here like beastly toadstools," he remarked. "If these very intelligent people didn't mind their p's and q's, the whole valley would be swamped, overgrown like a jungle, with the infernal things in one season." . 216

The Forbidden Garden

A LOCKED DOOR

"OUR ONLY OBLIGATION TO US, MR. VARTAN, will be to deliver to me a shovelful, say four pounds, of the soil in which this larkspur grows in the wild state. Provided, of course, that you succeed in discovering a specimen in bloom. If you find none of this variety, the loss is ours."

It was Charles Brassey, President of the famous seed firm, speaking in his private office of the London establishment. The interview had been brief in the extreme. Brassey, a stoutish, clean shaven man slightly past middle age, more like a prime minister than a business man in appearance and manner, had gone to the root of the matter in the first thirty seconds.

"We have enquired about you," he began, "and find your record as an oil explorer and later as an associate of the Geological Exploration Society of America satisfactory. Your work in Ecuador and Chile, particularly in the Andes, will be sufficient preparation, we hope, for our own undertaking. You have read Miss Driscott's articles, and doubtless you have guessed that she is our publicity agent. This plant," he indicated the superb specimen growing in a bamboo tub on a low table at his left, "is the delphinium of which she wrote."

These preliminaries disposed of, Brassey at once stated what the firm wanted of Vartan.

Rather overwhelmed by the abrupt success of the first stage of his adventure, Vartan glanced at the flower mechanically, did

not see it, pushed back his chair and, without a word, strolled over to the bleak north window, and stood staring down at the string of busses and motor cabs cutting their lugubrious way through the cheesy drizzle. The prospect was as depressing as the weather. Although the seed firm's great headquarters had come through the blitz with nothing more serious than shattered glass, the building across the street had taken a direct hit, and now loomed up black and gaunt.

It was less than six hours since he had got off the boat at Liverpool. Used to reasonable efficiency in business matters, and quite unprepared for super-American methods in a London business house, he was swept off his balance by the dizzy speed of it all. He vaguely wondered whether Brassey had not carefully rehearsed the scene in order to impress a New Yorker. The Marjorie Driscott incident, now boldly revealed in its true colors as a piece of bald advertising, strengthened his suspicions. On arriving at Paddington, he had taken a cab at once to Brassey House—as the firm somewhat audaciously styled their establishment 'founded in 1776'. He did not lose his head.

"Before looking into this further," he announced, wheeling about and facing Brassey, "I should like to talk to a friend."

"May we call him for you?"

"If it is not too much trouble. Pardon me, but I presume we may confer in private?"

"Certainly. Your friend's name and address?"

"William Shane, 16 Adelaide Square, Bloomsbury. The same Shane as you quoted in your cablegram."

Brassey permitted a smile to flicker over his diplomatic lips. He pressed a button.

"I anticipated your request, Mr. Vartan. In fact I suggested that Mr. Shane meet your boat, but he was too busy."

"He is associated with you?"

"Temporarily. We hope to induce him to stay permanently as a member of our scientific staff."

"But what on earth—? Shane is a paleobotanist."

"Precisely," Brassey confirmed. "An expert in fossil plants."

"You can't sell fossil seeds," Vartan blurted out before he realized what he was saying. Brassey relaxed for a moment.

"Have you never heard of the resurrection of the dead, Mr. Vartan?" he asked with an enigmatic smile.

"No, and neither have you," Vartan retorted, "because it hasn't happened yet. If this—"

His expostulations were cut short by the entrance of a prim secretary.

"Please ask Mr. Shane to join us as soon as convenient to him, Miss West. You may tell him that Mr. Vartan is here."

Miss West withdrew, and Brassey rose to follow her.

"You may talk here," he said. "I shall have some light refreshments sent in. Do you care for port? Sherry?"

The bewildered Vartan absently shook his head, and Brassey, with a stiff bow, withdrew. The door had all but closed when an afterthought opened it again. "May I suggest, while you are waiting for Mr. Shane, that you inspect that delphinium? It is unique. And, I may say," he added with a faint recurrence of his diplomatic smile, "it has *not* risen from the dead."

Dazed for a moment, Vartan quickly recovered his equilibrium.

"Brassey must be crazy," he muttered, running his hand through his flaming hair. To his surprise he discovered that he was perspiring. Ashamed of his repressed excitement, he walked resolutely over to the low table with its bamboo tub.

Vartan was by no means of a poetical nature. Yet, as his eyes took in for the first time the perfect beauty of the growing thing before him, an involuntary ejaculation burst from his lips. It meant nothing, and it meant everything. It was a distant echo of the shrill cry of astonishment, uttered by the low-browed brute that fathered our human kind, when first it recognized that the blotches of crimson and yellow, of purple and gold in the steaming jungles were something better than fruit to fill its belly—flowers, to feed its eyes.

To perhaps eighty out of a hundred human beings, the living thing in the bamboo tub would have been only so much vegetable matter with a purplish blue spike growing out of its indistinct green middle. To Vartan, who had trained himself to recognize beauty in at least one of nature's many kingdoms, it blazed forth as a vision of the perfect flower.

He did not hear the door open, or Miss West's crisp announcement, "Mr. Shane". Not until Shane had repeated his amused query did Vartan realize that he was not alone.

"Pretty good, isn't it?" he repeated, shaking his fellow adventurer's hand. "Just like you, I thought Brassey was crazy when I first talked to him. Oh, yes; I'm hired, whether I go with you or not. The stuff at this end is pretty interesting as it is. I'll show you what I'm doing after we've had lunch. Did Brassey tell you what he wants?"

"A shovelful of dirt. And you say he isn't crazy. All right; I'll take your word for it, pro tem."

"Crazy? No more than you are. Look at that plant! What's it worth? Commercially, I mean? Why, man, if that strain were propagated for the market, it would net this firm a cool million. Pounds, not dollars. Did you ever see anything like it? This beats an azure blue rose, if you get what I mean. It's rarer, much. Even a blind man would want one of these in his garden."

Shane's enthusiasm was partly aesthetic, partly professional. As a specialist in fossil plants, he had mastered a considerable range of living botany, in order to give his stone seeds and sandy fern spores—dusted out a grain at a time from singularly stubborn rocks—their true perspectives in the limitless vistas of life. By nature he was an enthusiast of the explosive type, wiry, lean as a whippet, dark as a Celt, and always eager to be off somewhere, provided it was indeed somewhere and not a mere nowhere not worth going to.

"Well, what about it?" he repeated, impatient at the lingering doubt on the less easily fired Vartan's perplexed features.

"Of course," Vartan hesitated. "That's why I came, isn't it?"

"You don't seem too enthusiastic," Shane remarked acidly. "Wait till you've seen my slides."

"Slides? Of what?"

"Ah," Shane responded mysteriously, "don't you wish you knew? Millions—billions—of them, and they all came out of a speck of dust I whiffed off a seed no bigger than a grain of mustard. Teeming with them, I tell you. Alive with them, positively alive! Only," he added as an afterthought, "they're all dead. Unless," he flung out half defiantly, "you believe with Brassey that they can rise from the dead."

Vartan shot his excited friend an appraising glance.

"You seem to be affected, too," he remarked. "By the way, you haven't said what all these miraculous 'they' and 'them' are."

"Wait and see," Shane snapped. "Here's lunch. Don't overdo

it, even if they do go out of their way to do one rather well in this clattering old fog hole. Better sit with your back to that flower. You won't feel decent eating steak and kidney pudding right in its face. I know. Brassey fed me in here the morning I applied for a job. Sit down. Damn it! That pest's back again. He's always forgetting something."

The nondescript servitor who had brought in the 'light refreshments' and laid them out on the teak table by the window, humbly deposited a jar of chutney beside the steaming steak and kidney pudding and withdrew, this time permanently. The incident seemed to throw a wet blanket over Shane's blazing enthusiasm.

"I don't like that broken down old white horse," Shane muttered under his breath. "He looks like a fool, and isn't. No man who isn't an idiot has a right to look like one. Sometimes—"

"Sometimes what?" Vartan encouraged.

"Oh, nothing. Only I sometimes wish I were back in Ecuador, with nothing to worry about except those red mites that get under your toe nails and gnaw your leg off to the hip. Have some stout? No? Then neither will I. Brassey is all right, of course, but I prefer to talk business on a comparatively empty stomach. This pie must have been designed for the Lord Mayor of London. I wouldn't take too much of it, if I were you. They'll want you to meet Marjorie after lunch."

"What has she to do with it?"

"Everything. You probably will think she's a raving beauty. Better not be drowsy when you meet her."

"Why not? What is more beautiful than a lovely woman seen through a haze?"

"Don't try to be epigrammatic on steak and kidney pudding plus stout. You'll be sick, if you do. Marjorie? She is publicity, plus brains, plus looks. Her facile pen is to finance this little jaunt to the back of beyond. You didn't suppose a conservative business house like Brassey's would fling away a small fortune for nothing, did you? Why spend your own money to finance your business when the public is clamoring for the chance to do it for you?"

"I see," said Vartan. "Brassey is out to make this expedition pay on publicity. Marjorie will come along as press agent?"

"Just that. They have already sold the exclusive press and

movie rights to Northfield's news agency to be syndicated in the British Empire and the United States. Brassey remarked that the firm will stand the loss if you come back empty handed? I thought so. Just what he told me. Loss? There won't be any loss. Brasseys' Limited stand to make a fortune out of this whichever way it goes. We'll take along a high powered radio outfit. The excited public will know before we do when we are about to be executed, or buried by an avalanche, or whatnot. Then they'll organize a relief expedition and make more publicity. Snowball effect."

"So you have really made up your mind to leave your slides and come along?"

"Oh, I suppose so. Fresh air, intimate insects, mountain blizzards, blistered feet, bleeding hands, and all that sort of thing—I need them again."

Vartan sighed his relief.

"Then you can take care of the charming Marjorie."

"Don't you believe it," Shane retorted. "Wait till you've chatted with her for fifteen minutes. She'll take care of me. And of you too. Marjorie wants copy, and lots of it. Unless one of us breaks his neck at least every other day, she will see to it that we do something more exciting. Had enough? What about dessert?"

"I don't believe I care for any," Vartan began, and stopped abruptly. The colorless waiter, or whatever he was, had materialized from empty space.

"Will you try this jam tart, sir?" he humbly suggested, proffering an enormous thick circular disk of crimson, criss-crossed by stout bars of undercooked pastry. Shane took the situation in hand.

"How the devil did you get in here?" he demanded.

"By the door, sir," the tart-bearer replied with exasperating meekness.

"Then you get to hell out of here by the door," Shane snapped, "and take that damned carbuncle with you."

"Yes, sir."

Vartan waited till the door had closed noiselessly behind the old white horse and his rejected tart.

"Better keep your temper, Bill, " he advised, "no matter what you suspect."

"I know, " Shane admitted grudgingly. "It's the Irish in me, I suppose."

"You do suspect something?" Vartan queried.

Shane filled his pipe—a short, ancient clay— and lit it before replying.

"As I said," he began, "that old horse is no fool. He's Mr. Brassey's personal bodyguard, or something of the sort. Probably a retired butler who has been with the family since 1776. Does all Brassey's chores for him. General factotum about the offices and seed laboratories. Always sticking his long bald nose in where and when it's least expected. Seems to have taken a particular fancy to me and my high powered ultra microscope."

"Spying, as it were?"

"It looks that way. The long and the short of it is this. Brassey's know they can be trusted, but believe nobody else can. I'm watched every move I make, as if they thought I was going to steal the safe."

"Pardon me, sir," a humble voice suggested from behind the stately delphinium, "but would you and your friend care for after lunch cigars? Mr. Brassey suggests that you try these. They are made from specially selected leaf grown on the firm's Sumatra seed plantation."

In grim silence Shane selected one of the almost blood red cigars, and motioned Vartan to help himself. With something like a leer of triumph on his long, equine features, the pest faded from the room.

"There you are," Shane exclaimed. "He arrived with these infernal cigars just in time to hear me say I am going to steal the safe. I beg that old plug's pardon. He's no ex-butler. Scotland Yard is his home stable. No man who isn't a born porch climber can enter a room as that pest does. Well, do you want to take it on, now that you've seen what they think of us?"

"All the more," Vartan asserted firmly. "If Brassey's choose to suspect us, it's their privilege, as they are putting up the money. Personally, I think they are within their rights. Wouldn't you make sure of your men before you hired them?"

"But they have hired us," Shane pointed out. "Practically, that is. They've taken me on, and Brassey all but got down on his knees to you. I don't like this being spied on."

"That's just your Irish again," Vartan laughed. "As for me,

I enjoy it. Doesn't it prove that this shovelful of dirt we are after must be worth its weight in big diamonds?"

"If it actually is dirt they want," Shane retorted gloomily. "How do you know it is?"

"Brassey said so. He looks like a man who knows his own mind. I honestly believe that he craves that dirt, although for the life of me I can't guess why. If he wants something else, why doesn't he say so?"

"Ever hear of sealed orders?" Shane hinted significantly.

"Sure. So have you."

"In Ecuador, wasn't it?" Shane went on. "When we left Guayaquil we thought we were going to look for oil only. Then the boss of our party opened his orders. Incidentally, I found out why an oil company hired me, a paleobotanist, to go on an oil survey."

"But it was all innocent enough," Vartan protested. "Our sealed orders were simply to make a thorough geological survey of certain sectors of the Andes. Oil shales and the rest were to be merely incidental."

"Exactly," Shane cut in. "Ever hear of uranium deposits? More valuable than oil. That's what our astute friends in Washington really wanted to find out about. They took me on as a blind to the rest of you."

"Why not?" Vartan objected. "They paid us well, and no harm has come of what we reported."

"You wait," Shane replied darkly. "Well, we can't stop it now. About our own business. Brassey will spring the trap on us when we're hopelessly bogged somewhere in the Himalayas, with no earthly chance of getting back to civilization until we do his job for him."

"Perhaps so," Vartan agreed. His jaw set, and his red hair seemed to grow a shade redder. "If that is Brassey's game," he declared, "I'm in it stronger than ever. He can spring all the traps he likes, for anything I care. As for sealed orders, I've already got mine."

"Where?" Shane demanded.

"Here," Vartan tapped his forehead. "And nothing short of a bullet will break the seal till I've carried out my orders."

He stopped abruptly, aware of the acute distaste on Shane's mobile features. Glancing behind him, he saw the cause. The

factotum had reappeared, this time with a rich silver coffee service.

"Mr. Brassey," he almost neighed, "thought you would appreciate a demitasse from the firm's own coffee. He asked me to inform you that this was grown on our own experimental seed farms in Brazil. It is much superior to the commercial product."

They accepted the miraculous coffee in dumb disgust. The factotum's hand was already on the doorknob when Shane called him back.

"Would you mind explaining how you got into the room this time?"

A mask of resigned obstinacy settled on the pest's meek features.

"Through the service door, sir," he replied in an injured tone. "If you will look behind the delphinium by Mr. Brassey's desk, you will see it. The kitchenette is through that door." With mulish effrontery he now addressed an obsequious inquiry to Vartan. "Kitchenette is the correct American term for pantry, is it not?"

"No," Vartan answered shortly. "We shan't need finger bowls. Please don't bring us anything more."

"Not even if it were grown in the Garden of Eden," Shane added.

"Very well sir. Will you please ring the bell when you wish to see Mr. Brassey?"

"Yes!" Shane snapped. "Now go to the devil."

"Yes, sir; thank you sir."

"If that man's a fool," Shane remarked when the door was really closed, "I'm a cretin imbecile. Do you grasp what he overheard on this raid?"

"The tail end of a perfectly innocent remark."

"Innocent? If you call 'sealed orders' innocent talk for an employee who is only half hired, I don't. Wait till old Horse Face tells Brassey."

"Perhaps we had better not," Vartan suggested. "Press the button, will you?"

In answer to the bell, Miss West appeared with surprising alacrity. From the scowl on Shane's face he evidently suspected her of listening at the keyhole. As she entered by the kitchenette door, the suspicion may not have been wholly groundless. For the

first time Vartan had an uneasy feeling that all was not so open and aboveboard as Brassey had tried to make it appear.

Vartan's method in dealing with a delicate situation was redheaded. It was simple and extremely direct. As a matter of principle he invariably kicked over the pan and spilled all the fat into the fire at once. Ignoring the too efficient Miss West for a moment, he rather insultingly turned his back on her and addressed Shane.

"We had better watch our step here," he admonished sharply. "This young lady evidently does her typing on the kitchen sink—if there is one behind that door." Miss West gasped, and went pale. Vartan wheeled about and faced her. "Is there?" he demanded.

Miss West kept her head. She was highly paid for that very faculty.

"Did you wish to see Mr. Brassey?" she inquired in a business-like tone.

"Presently," Vartan retorted evenly. "First, Mr. Shane and I would like to know whether the kitchenette or pantry is behind that door?"

For a fraction of a second she hesitated, and was lost. Before she could either reply or retreat, Vartan had beaten her to the suspected door. Miss West was unused to direct methods. Those of her employer were peaceable and diplomatic. Under the stress of a totally new stimulas, she temporarily lost her wits and foolishly attempted to cut off Vartan's assault on the door. They collided in the immediate vicinity of the priceless delphinium. Miss West, being the lighter body, was hurled with considerable violence against the low table on which the superb plant stood. There was a faint metallic tinkle.

"Ah!" Vartan exclaimed. "You don't want us in your kitchen-ette. Give up bridge, Miss West, and learn poker. Then you won't show the whole world your hand when you have only a pair of deuces. Well, Shane, what about it? Shall we do a little exploring here before we start for the Himalayas?"

"I'm on," Shane snapped. "Open that door."

Vartan turned the handle. The door was locked. Miss West permitted herself the luxury of a slight smile, not unlike her employer's.

"I shall stick to bridge," she remarked to the delphinium.

Shane let the blushing Vartan fight it out. For a moment Vartan was nonplussed. Then he calmly let his scientific training assert itself, and critically reconstructed the entire incident, from Miss West's entrance to his own apparently futile assault on the locked door. For fully a minute there was an intense silence in the room. Miss West stood indifferently regarding the peerless delphinium. Shane furtively studied the secretary's face, striving to find some clue to what she was thinking. Vartan coldly analysed himself in the light of what had happened.

Why had he bolted for the door? To beat the secretary to it. Therefore she must have shown an impulse to prevent him from opening it. He had acted instinctively, with his muscles. But muscles, in a crisis, are mind. So far he must be right. She had tried to keep him away from the door. But, if it was locked, probably by a night latch that would permit entrance from the supposed kitchenette, but not exit into it, Miss West must have known the fact before she tried to intercept him. Her action therefore was a decoy, unless she had indeed lost her head in the stress of a sudden and new fear. Dismissing the possibility of a decoy, as he could find no rational grounds for it, Vartan decided that Miss West's panicky impulse to protect her employer had momentarily betrayed her. The cool unconcern with which she now studied the azure flower before her was merely a natural expression of relief.

"Why did you try to prevent me from opening this door if you knew it was locked from the inside?"

Miss West stifled a yawn.

"Because you nearly blundered into this plant," she elucidated briefly. "It is worth a hundred thousand pounds."

Vartan made no reply. Shane, still watching the secretary narrowly, caught the question in Vartan's eyes, and nodded slightly. There was a splintering crash as Vartan lunged with his full weight against the door and tumbled into the room beyond. Shane was after him in a flash, leaving the unfortunate Miss West to shriek or faint as she saw fit.

2

OFF

AT FIRST GLANCE THE ROOM IN WHICH SHANE and Vartan found themselves was precisely what old Horse-face had asserted it to be, a kitchenette and nothing more. The meal they had just enjoyed had not been cooked there; it had been carried in from the nearest cook shop. Only the used plates and cutlery, with the extensive remains of the steak and kidney pudding, reposed untidily on the tiny gas stove. It was clear that nothing more substantial than tea had ever been prepared in the alleged kitchenette.

Vartan began to wish he had believed Miss West. Shane, more experienced in the underground life of the Brasseys' great establishment, used his eyes. His intuition of double dealing was too strong to be all fantasy. Presently his eyes fixed on the service table. An unfinished game of solitaire decorated the white oilcloth. Half a dozen cards, scattered roughly in the general shape of an open fan, but in loose disorder, told their own story. The player had abandoned his game in a hurry.

"Look at those," Shane directed, calling Vartan's attention to the scattered cards.

"I saw them," Vartan answered quietly. "Go and see what has happened to Miss West. Don't let her get away. You know the layout better than I do."

Shane darted into the other room, only to find that the secretary had departed.

"She's gone!" he called back.

"Follow her, and bring her here. If you see Brassey, send him in. Call the police. These people may be double crossing Brassey. Take a chance on it, anyway."

If Shane had used his eyes, Vartan had used his ears. The metallic tinkle when Miss West all but capsized the priceless delphinium had not escaped his sharp attention. The instant he heard it, he suspected the cause. Otherwise he would not have burst open the door so blithely. The unfinished game of solitaire confirmed his suspicions of an unauthorized listener all but caught in the act.

The rest was a mere matter of easy, systematic searching. The speaking end of the rather crudely concealed dictaphone was discovered in the drawer of the table; the receiving end in the dense lower foliage of the delphinium in Brassey's office. As Brassey could have no reason for having his own conversations overheard, one of two things must be true. Either the dictaphone had been installed on Brassey's orders to record what took place between Shane and Vartan, or certain of his employees had been bribed to spy on him. It remained to be seen which solution was correct. In any event, Vartan felt, he was justified in getting to the bottom of things at once. If Brassey's employees were betraying him, the police would be welcome; if Brassey was playing a double game with a couple of prospective employees for a highly dangerous mission, then the police would be doubly welcome—to Shane and Vartan.

Shane must have worked fast. Brassey arrived in the wrecked kitchenette within forty seconds, the police within eighty. If actions count as evidence, Brassey's acquitted him. At a glance he took in the dictaphone and evaluated Vartan's questioning glance. He turned to one of the three bobbies who had answered Shane's summons.

"Telephone these names and descriptions at once to Scotland Yard: William Arbold, Annetta West." He proceeded to give brief, accurate descriptions, which the officer jotted down on his pad, of the factotum and of the secretary. "The names," he concluded, "are probably fictitious. It will be useless to look for either of these persons at their lodgings. Advise the police to watch all air and steamship lines to the Continent. I do not believe it will be necessary to watch the transatlantic steamers or airliners. The police must use their own judgment about that."

"What is the charge, sir?" the officer inquired.

"Leave it open."

"You will have to swear out a warrant, sir, before we can arrest the parties."

"I know." Brassey produced a card. "Hand that to Inspector Ransome. He will understand. And here is something for yourselves."

"Thank you, sir."

They left, impressed but not crushed by the five pound tip.

"How did you discover it?" Brassey demanded of Vartan when they were alone.

Vartan explained. "I must apologize," he concluded, "for taking liberties with your door."

"The apology is all the other way," Brassey protested. "What will you and Mr. Shane think of us now?"

"I can't answer for Shane. As for myself, I shall continue to think exactly as I did when you told me this morning what you want. A shovelful of dirt, wasn't it?"

"From a certain locality. Or rather, from the soil in which that delphinium flourishes in its native state."

"So I understood you to say. But what exactly do you mean?"

"What I said, Mr. Vartan. Nothing more, nothing less. And, if you fail, we stand the loss."

"Is that all you care to say?"

"Until you agree to my terms unreservedly, it is."

"Very well. I accept."

"Without reservation?"

"Yes, or with only one that won't amount to anything. Shane must accept too. Here he is now."

Before Shane could speak, Brassey had put his question.

"Will you accept my offer if Mr. Vartan does?"

"Yes."

"Then it is settled. You can take passage for Bombay tomorrow morning. The details of your outfit are all arranged as far as is possible in England. For the rest, our agents will attend to you in Bombay. I shall see that berths are reserved for you. Excuse me a moment, while I ask a clerk to take a message to the P and O office. Miss West, unfortunately, has deserted me."

"Is she coming back?" Shane called after him.

"I think not," Brassey replied. "And I doubt whether she will send for her luggage."

"Well?" Shane queried. "What now?"

"Same as ever," Vartan laughed. "Old Horse Face fooled us properly. All that elaborate materializing and vanishing act of his was staged to make us suspect Brassey of spying on us. The old plug listened at his end till one of us was about to make some compromising remark, and then sneaked in with the dessert, or the cigars, or the coffee."

"You really believe," Shane hinted darkly, "that he was trying to turn suspicion of himself onto Brassey? How do you know that Brassey didn't pay him to do it? The police won't find either him or Miss West, because Brassey has spirited them away. He has learned all he wanted to know. Luckily we said nothing. At least *I* said nothing; you said a lot. Brassey knows all about your 'sealed orders' now. And isn't it slick the way he has covered up his spying?"

At first Vartan was inclined to pooh-pooh his imaginative friend's diabolical insinuations. But, the more he reflected on them, the uneasier he became.

"As for my sealed orders," he protested, "they are perfectly innocent and won't do this firm a bit of harm. They are my personal affair only. And what is more, I shan't make a cent out of them, even if I succeed in carrying them through. I hear Brassey coming," he concluded hurriedly.

"Guilty, eh?" Shane grinned. "All right, I won't give you away."

"You will take the boat train tomorrow morning at 10:45," Brassey announced. "You sail at three o'clock."

The two adventurers exchanged glances. Brassey's manner had changed. They now were employees, and therefore under orders. Neither was used to excessive bossing, even while working for wages.

"Has it occurred to you, Mr. Brassey," Shane drawled, "that you have not yet said a word about compensation?"

"It has, Mr. Shane. The firm thinks that one hundred pounds a month each will be liberal compensation. We, of course, will pay all expenses."

"How long do you expect us to be gone?" Shane pursued.

"Twelve months at least. Not more than twenty four at the most."

"It strikes me, Mr. Brassey," Shane remarked drily, "that you know a lot about this expedition that you haven't told us. You call four hundred dollars a month liberal?"

"The firm considers it not only liberal, Mr. Shane, but generous."

"Then I'm damned if I do!" Shane flashed. "If Northfields can pay you seventy five thousand pounds for the press, movie and radio rights, and you stand to lose only nineteen thousand dollars at the worst on Vartan and me, I call it pretty small."

"The expenses," Brassey reminded him with a show of dignity, "will be high."

"There's something in that, Bill," Vartan remarked ironically.

"A lot, I admit. But not over three hundred thousand dollars worth. Now, Mr. Brassey, we are willing to meet you half way. Vartan," he snapped, "keep out of this. I'm business manager of our trip. We agree to go, and to work for you exactly two years, beginning tomorrow morning at 10:45, for the sum of one hundred thousand dollars."

Shane's audacity was the outcome of several weeks' close observation. He knew that the firm was at the end of its rope in its efforts to induce experienced plant explorers to take up its project. Why these men should have refused, as most probably they had, remained a mystery. To the intense surprise of both men, Brassey capitulated without a fight. Indeed, he went farther than either would have dared to suggest.

"Gentlemen," he replied, "you have me at an obvious disadvantage. Circumstances force me to accept your terms. You, Mr. Shane, seem to be a man of some acuteness. I have not known Mr. Vartan long enough to form a correct opinion of him. But," he continued, turning to Vartan, "your friend has had an advantage. He has been with us long enough to guess the humiliating truth. Not one competent seed collector whom we could trust would have anything to do with this expedition when its ultimate object was explained to him. Now, gentlemen, you must admit that I could not be much franker. Could I?"

"You could," Vartan retorted bluntly.

"How, Mr. Vartan?"

"By enlightening us as to the real object of our expedition."

"But I have done so. You are to bring back to me approximately four pounds of the native soil in which that delphinium flourishes. The probable region in which you may begin to search for growing specimens will be confided to you when you reach Bombay."

"If this is all, why did the others turn down your offer?"

"Because, Mr. Vartan," Brassey replied with bland candor, "they either thought I was insane or, like you, they imagined I was concealing some preposterous danger behind my straightforward business proposal."

Vartan smiled appreciatively. "What you call turning the tables, I suppose. Would it be impertinent to ask why a shovelful of this dirt is so precious?"

"Not impertinent, merely irrelevant. I have agreed to Mr. Shane's demand. The purpose for which I wish to use that soil is of interest only to the firm."

"That's fair enough," Shane cut in. "The firm has given us what we asked. It's up to us to do our darndest to give it what it wants, and ask no questions."

"Exactly, Mr. Shane," Brassey commented with a touch of severity. "As a matter of fact," he continued with an enigmatic smile, "I was on the point of offering you gentlemen a more attractive opportunity than that of merely earning your salaries. I was about to draw up an agreement to hand over to you the entire residue of what Northfields are paying us on your return to London. But, as you yourselves have suggested the alternative, I am only too happy to oblige you. Shall we go into my office?"

And forthwith he proceeded to write out in triplicate a concise statement of Shane's terms, in the form of a contract stripped of all verbiage. While he was writing, Shane winked at the somewhat crestfallen Vartan. The wink seemed to credit Brassey with more diplomacy than veracity. Having blotted the last copy, Brassey rang for two clerks to witness the signatures.

"Now, gentlemen," he said, when the witnesses had left, "my afternoon is at your disposal. Perhaps Mr. Vartan would like to see some of our scientific work?"

Vartan expressed his half-hearted eagerness to inspect the laboratories. He would greatly have preferred to discuss the expedition, or even the delphinium. Nor did Brassey's silence on the hurried departure of Miss West and the factotum altogether

please him. He, like Shane, was suffering acutely from curiosity. Brassey simply ignored the whole incident.

"Shall we have a look at what you have been doing, Mr. Shane?" Brassey suggested. "I imagine Mr. Vartan would find that more interesting than our experiments on germination."

Shane nodded. "I was going to show him anyway."

They were about to follow Brassey from the office, when he paused, as if struck by an afterthought.

"By the way, Mr. Vartan," he remarked casually, "these may interest you."

Something in his manner instantly roused their suspicions. Taking a slim key from his watchchain—Brassey was solid and conservative in his dress and personal adornment—he proceeded to unlock a small wall safe behind his desk.

"It is said in the Scriptures, I believe," he remarked as he rummaged through the contents of the safe, "that no man can serve two masters. And I seem to recall that the passage referred specifically to God and Mammon. Now, which may be the one, and which the other in your philosophy, Mr. Vartan, I do not venture to guess."

Somewhat taken aback, Vartan sensed what was coming. In some as yet unexplained way, Brassey had heard of his secret intention of making a side trip, on the firm's time, to verify his so-called 'preposterous hypothesis' regarding the origin of certain Central Asiatic fossil beds. He decided to forestall the awkward showdown.

"Mr. Brassey," he declared, "if I have a private purpose in this undertaking, I give you my word that it will not cost your firm a cent. I shall pay for it out of my own pocket. Nor will it interfere in any way with your business."

Brassey had found what he was looking for, a fat bundle of cablegrams.

"I quite agree," Brassey replied; "your private project will not cost us a penny. Nor will it interfere in any way with the fulfillment of your contract with us. In fact," he continued, smiling faintly, "I am overjoyed in finding at last a man as mad as myself who is willing to spend his own money on a preposterous hypothesis."

"What! Who told you that?"

"Your former Chief, Mr. Grimsby. If you care to glance

through those cablegrams, you will see the facts. While you were crossing the Atlantic, I corresponded by cable, through my agents and directly, quite extensively with your Chief." His half bantering tone suddenly hardened. "Mr. Vartan, I make it my personal concern to know my men before I entrust them with important business. This expedition on which you and Mr. Shane are going is of the supremest importance, not only to this firm, but to many others. How many, I shall not venture to say. Nearly fifty times have I been on the point of engaging men for this enterprise, only to reject them at the last moment on receipt of an unfavorable report. In many instances the final cause of rejection would seem trivial to an outsider. I take no chance that can be foreseen and avoided. During Mr. Shane's stay with us, I had his past minutely investigated by the best detective agencies in the United States and South America. I did not take for granted that your F.B.I. was to be trusted without an independent check. Perhaps better than either of you could know, I knew why your expedition was given top priority at a critical period of the war."

"Oh, Lord!" Shane groaned.

"There were irregularities, of course, Mr. Shane," Brassey continued, "such as any intelligent employer would expect to find in the life of a normal young man, but nothing of any consequence for the present purpose. So," he continued, turning to Vartan, "when Mr. Shane mentioned you as being a likely man for our undertaking, we at once cabled to you."

"But how—" Vartan began.

"Easily. A good detective agency, not a mere police bureau, has opportunities for making contacts with even the most exclusive people. Mr. Grimsby is almost in that class. It seemed rather strange to us, Mr. Vartan, that you should be abandoning a high grade position as paleontologist to the Geological Exploration Society of America, to accept one with us whose value is at best doubtful. Therefore we investigated. The right contacts were easily made. The grave importance of our undertaking was explained to Mr. Grimsby, and we begged him, in the name of science, to tell us your true motive for accepting our proposal. As you must know, Mr. Grimsby's ethics are such that he was powerless before an appeal of this kind."

"Pardon me," Vartan interrupted, "but did he tell your representative the nature of my hypothesis?"

"Surely you know Mr. Grimsby better than we do. Is he the man to betray a confidence? He told us all that it was necessary for us to know, without in any way hinting at what you hope to discover. He stated merely that you wished either to prove or disprove a certain 'preposterous hypothesis' of your own. Is that a satisfactory answer?"

Vartan nodded. "There's nothing disgraceful about my hypothesis," he laughed, "only it is so crazy."

Brassey's eyes gleamed.

"Would it apply to plants?"

"You have guessed, then?"

"I have been on the same track for twenty years! If I hadn't been obliged to take over this business when I was twenty-five, I would have shown the whole world years ago that I'm not a madman."

"You are both wrong," Shane cut in, quietly and decisively. "I know what Vartan hopes to explain—the richness of certain fossil beds somewhere in Asia. And I can guess, Mr. Brassey, what you are after. That delphinium. You both have theories. And, as I said, you're both wrong; at best only half right. I have evidence that neither of you has ever imagined."

"Where?" Brassey demanded.

"On my slides. That is, if you are like me, imaginative enough to believe the incredible. Oh, I know," he hurried on, "what Grimsby reported to you about me. He said I was discharged from his Society—it is really his—because I was long on imagination and short on facts."

"Precisely," Brassey confirmed. "And that is why I first became seriously interested in you. But go on. This evidence you speak of? What is its nature?"

"Come and see. Vartan doesn't give a whoop about those cablegrams. His reputation can't be in it with mine. That Aztec girl in Quito—oh Lord!"

They followed him down a dingy corridor to his cubby hole of a laboratory, a tiny room arranged to take advantage of whatever clean daylight the London smudge might afford. On a bare bench by the north window a microscope and its accessories stood out

in severe isolation. Shane halted abruptly with a sharp exclamation.

"They're gone!"

"What?"

"The slides."

"Are you sure?" Brassey asked in a level voice. "You may have put the boxes away before going to lunch. Look in the drawers."

"Very well. But it's no use. The boxes were at the right of the window when I left."

A thorough search confirmed the complete disappearance of the slides. Brassey wasted no time in further futile searching.

"How much could experts discover from your slides?" he demanded of Shane.

"Depends upon the experts. The right men could guess a lot."

"Would they know where the dust was obtained?"

"Not likely, except in a general way. They would have to search the whole earth. Without something more to go on, they might suppose you collected the stuff on the roof of this building."

"You will be followed," Brassey prophesied, "as soon as the experts decipher your slides."

"They mustn't get that far. Stop the slides before they fall into competent hands."

"How?"

"What's your famous Scotland Yard good for?"

"Nothing, in a case like this. They have not caught a single one of the spies that have pilfered from these laboratories for the past thirteen years. William Arbold and Annetta West will get clean away like the others. And they are more dangerous than any of them. They must know that you two have finally been engaged. Still, I shall try to start the wheels at once. Excuse me if I do not see you off tomorrow morning. Get your tickets and money from the cashier."

"Is Miss Driscott coming with us?" Shane called after the vanishing Brassey.

"Miss Driscott will meet you in Bombay. She left last week to make the necessary press arrangements."

That was the last of Brassey they saw for many a day. They spent the afternoon and most of the night talking endlessly. In the morning they were off.

3

MARJORIE

"NOW IF I WERE SUPERSTITIOUS," SHANE REMARKED, sweeping an arm toward the buttressed barrier of the tableland behind Bombay, "I should take that rock wall as an omen of what we shall have to break through before we get Brassey his dirt."

"Probably worse," Vartan encouraged drily. "Those basalt walls can't be over two thousand feet high at the most. Brassey seemed to hint that we may have to climb Mt. Everest before we really start."

The engines of the steamer had all but stopped, as she drifted cautiously through the swarming craft of Bombay harbor, in an effort to dock without upsetting a score or so of the smaller fry and drowning their half naked crews. At last the delicate feat was accomplished; customs men and quarantine officers trooped aboard, and one by one the passengers were released in alphabetical order. Vartan was the last but one, a Wilson. Shane considerately waited for him, although his feet itched to sense once more the stability of the solid earth.

"If Miss Driscott isn't here to meet us," Shane remarked, "we may as well go at once to her hotel."

"Brassey's last radiogram said she would be here," Vartan reminded him.

"I know. But it's only seven o'clock. You really can't expect a beautiful girl to go without her sleep. Hullo! There she is. Good old Marjorie!"

Shane excitedly indicated a slim figure standing alone at the left of the exit from the pier. Evidently she was looking for Shane, for she anxiously scanned the trickling stream of passengers for his familiar face. She and Shane had grown to be great pals in the London office. Her preoccupation gave Vartan a unique opportunity for studying her closely.

His first impression was merely that of a strikingly pretty girl in a snug-fitting white sport costume and chic panama hat. A single scarlet blossom, probably a hibiscus, and a neat white parasol completed her outfit. Her hair, Vartan noted, harmonized with her costume, being a rich, warm yellow. The face was not exactly in repose, because her mind evidently was fully alert. Nevertheless its expression was unstudied and natural. Observing her narrowly, Vartan felt that here was an opportunity to size her up such as he might never have again.

Vartan was a born critic of human character. His first impressions were right ninety times out of a hundred, and his second estimates were invariably just. This trait had served him well in many a tight place, and indeed it had probably saved his life more than once on his South American rambles. He now took a sharp second look at Marjorie Driscott. Luck favored him. She had just sighted Shane. For perhaps half a second, in the relaxation from strained attention to conventional friendliness, he saw her as she was. That revealing flash was worth ten years of close acquaintanceship. Vartan felt that he knew her. From the warmth of Shane's salutation as he grasped her hand, Vartan knew that his fellow adventurer would never understand Marjorie Driscott.

Her greeting to Vartan was friendly. His strong face evidently attracted her, and his red hair was not wholly unpleasing to her eyes, if her half amused glance at his uncovered head were correctly interpreted. At close range her blue eyes, fresh color and firm chin were even more attractive than from a distance.

"Mr. Brassey cabled that I am to make you boys comfortable until we start."

"When?" Vartan demanded bluntly.

For a fraction of a second a slight stare, almost of suspicion, hardened the sunny light in her eyes. Shane also caught that instantaneous freezing of her goodfellowship. To him it was a signal that Brassey still distrusted Vartan and himself, and that he had, rather meanly, used Marjorie to spy on their loyalty. What

Vartan thought he scarcely knew himself. Marjorie recovered her sunshine instantly.

"Tonight," she smiled. "But don't let's talk business until you two are rested. I'm to take you up to my hotel for breakfast. Now don't tell me," she begged, seeing the refusal in Vartan's eyes, "that you had tea and biscuits on that horrid boat? It will simply ruin what I've planned for you."

Over their protests that they had already tried to enjoy one English breakfast, she rushed them off to another. They were just about to follow her into the waiting cab, when a bundle of rags in the gutter caught her attention. She stepped from the cab, and rejoined them on the littered sidewalk.

"Look at that," she said in a low voice. "Isn't it terrible to think what human beings will do under the drive of fanaticism? Oh, it is worse than drink or drugs!" With a shudder she averted her eyes from the spectacle she had invited them to witness. "But look at it," she said, "well. You will understand better what Mr. Brassey asked me to tell you before we start."

Overcoming their natural revulsion, the men forced themselves to look at the squalid fakir cowering under his clouts. The man might have been only fifty; he looked seventy. Filthy beyond description, a mass of ugly scars from self-inflicted gashes, some of which still gaped hideously with the woodashes which kept the sores alive, this barely living example of faith gone mad droned incessantly the meaningless formula which was to win it everlasting annihilation in the life to come, and which kept what remained of a soul in the husk of a body in this life, by inducing zealots more superstitious than itself to fill the beggers' bowl at its crumpled feet.

"It would be an act of mercy," Vartan muttered savagely, "to zip a bullet through its brain, if it has any."

"And hang for it?" Shane asked grimly. "British law comes down pretty hard on that sort of charity. Still, I admit it might be the happiest thing the poor old fellow could know."

"I wasn't thinking of him," Vartan began with fierce contempt. He became aware that Marjorie was listening with critical attention. Not caring whether he shocked her or not, he finished what he had to say. "This thing isn't worth any human being's passing pity. It is a filthy travesty on the human race. No; it

should be put out of the way for the sake of those who have to see it."

"That's rather rough on him," Shane objected. "Nevertheless, I agree in general." He tossed a silver coin onto the dirty rice in the fakir's bowl. A seething cloud of iridescent flies steamed up from the sour food, and almost instantly settled again to their banquet. "Are you contributing?" he demanded quizzically of Vartan.

"No."

"Miss Driscott?" Shane suggested.

"Not today," she replied, slightly emphasizing the last word. She turned away and preceded them into the cab.

Wondering uneasily what her purpose was in compelling them to look at a thing which they would willingly have ignored, they took their seats in silence. The cab made but slow progress through the colorful streets. At first interested in their exotic surroundings, both men gradually surrendered to a stifling oppression. An appalling sense of fecundity unchecked smothered any joy they might otherwise have experienced in their first half hour of Mother India. Not only vegatation seemed to boil from the brown earth wherever a square foot of it was exposed, but also uncountable swarms of human beings. Conversation in such surroundings seemed impertinent. Nature was speaking. At length Marjorie, just before they reached the hotel, broke the silence.

"Would you believe that Mr. Brassey could ever become like that fakir?"

They regarded her in amazed silence. A reply seemed unnecessary; the question was too ridiculous. She greeted their consternation with a short, bitter laugh.

"I repeat what I said," she went on. "Fanaticism is the one great curse of the human race." Her manner suddenly lightened. "Please don't think I'm trying to preach at you," she laughed gaily. "I'm only carrying out my instructions by giving you Lesson One in the ways of India. Mr. Brassey asked me to. Now," she coaxed, "you must admit I carried it off rather well, didn't I?"

"Perhaps a shade too well," Vartan retorted, not wholly in jest. Shane roared with laughter. Marjorie had played a capital joke on them. And better still, by an adroitly mysterious question,

she had paid back her employer for imposing a disagreeable task.

"Did you like your job?" he gurgled.

"Not before breakfast," she admitted charmingly. "Well, here's where we get out. Rather a stuffy place—footmen at every post and all that sort of tosh, but they feed you well. At Mr. Brassey's direction I have engaged rooms for you for the day. Breakfast will be served in the blue room at eight fifteen. I'll see you there."

After a washup, Shane joined Vartan in the latter's room.

"Well, what do you think of our press agent?"

"And schoolteacher," Vartan added drily. "Frankly, I don't care for her type of instruction."

"Nor do I. But don't blame it on Marjorie. The poor girl has to do what Brassey orders. Like us, she's earning her wages."

"From what I've seen so far," Vartan countered grimly, "we'll earn every cent of that hundred thousand before we see New York again. There's something shady about this whole affair. Your friend Miss Driscott seems to know what it is, too. Is she Brassey's confidential secretary, as well as his publicity agent?"

"More or less. He was always 'conferring' with her, and she seemed to have the run of the London offices. As I told you, Marjorie is efficiency plus brains."

"So it seems."

"You don't like her?"

"I didn't say that."

"First impressions—" Shane began.

"Are usually wrong," Vartan finished for him. "I suspend judgment in Miss Driscott's case. In Brassey's also. The deeper we get into this thing, the 'curiouser and curiouser' it becomes, as Alice would say. I'm beginning to suspect we have been hired by a genial lunatic. By the way, there is no doubt about us getting our money, is there?"

"Not the slightest," Shane reassured him. "Brassey has given us not only his word, but a contract. Either is worth its full face value in the City."

"Then I'm more or less up a tree for the moment," Vartan confessed. "I can't make head or tail of what Brassey thinks he is doing. Well, it is ten past eight. Shall we go down and join your charming friend in the blue room?"

"You bet. Come on; I feel it in my joints that she has something more than another of those interminable breakfasts."

Out of consideration for their American feelings, Marjorie had ordered a light repast which would leave them with clear consciences and clearer heads. She herself disposed of a substantial meal, explaining that as she but seldom ate lunch, she needed fuel for the day's work.

The talk at first was light and bantering. Gradually, under Vartan's direction, it took a more serious turn toward their own affairs. He was not slow to observe that Marjorie seemed to welcome the change with an eagerness which she just failed to repress. Shane had jokingly referred to the last meal he and Vartan had enjoyed on Brassey's hospitality. Old 'White Horse' stalked through Shane's highly colored narrative, bearing an infinite series of jam tarts. The crisp and ultra-respectable Miss West also came in for her share of the humor. A strange glow in Marjorie's sympathetic eyes was interpreted by Shane as amused interest in his story. Vartan, trying to keep his own eyes on his plate, could not quite make out the light in Marjorie's. Her comment, when Shane finished, puzzled him still more.

"Yes," she said, "there were always spies in the London office. And poor Mr. Brassey is so straightforward himself that he never suspects anyone until it is too late. He cabled me all about William Arbold and Annetta West. Arbold was with the firm for ten years; Miss West, five. And in all that time, Mr. Brassey saw nothing suspicious in the actions of either."

"Did you, Miss Driscott?" Vartan asked pointedly.

She lit a cigarette before answering. Studying the tip as she exhaled her first puff, she replied with careful deliberation.

"That is what I call a cruel question, Mr. Vartan. I have just said that Mr. Brassey has let one spy after another slip through his fingers because he himself is decent. How am I to answer? You must see my dilemma."

"I do," Vartan acknowledged gravely. She dropped her eyes, and he continued. "Putting aside the incomprehensible part of it all—why spies should infest a great wholesale seed house—I can't see how Mr. Brassey can trust anyone after the experiences he has had."

"Nor do I," she retorted coolly, looking him squarely in the eyes.

"Do you mean," Shane blurted out, "that you suspect us?"

"Yes," she said, with a quick glance at Vartan. "Now you know. I always play a straight hand."

"But, my dear Miss Driscott," Shane protested, "if you only knew how utterly in the dark Vartan and I are about this whole expedition, you would laugh at the utter absurdity of your suspicions. Surely you know me well enough by now? Didn't you have all the opportunities you wanted to find out about me during the six months I worked in your London house?"

"Arbold worked there ten years, Miss West five, I six. Arbold and Miss West have escaped. From Mr. Brassey's cablegrams I doubt whether they will ever be heard of again. Scotland Yard has given up hope of tracing them. It is the old story."

"I see," said Shane. "The moral is so obvious that an idiot could see it. I'm not in that class, Marjorie. Thanks for the compliment."

"Nothing personal was intended," she answered in a low voice. "It was merely a matter of business. I must protect my employer's interests. And in all fairness to me, you and Mr. Vartan should admit that I am justified in making you prove yourselves."

"Certainly," Vartan cut in before Shane could protest. "State what you consider necessary, and we will do it. Whatever Shane may think, I have no personal feelings whatever about any suspicions that Brasseys' Limited—whom you represent—may entertain toward us. The firm is within its rights. As you say, and, as Mr. Brassey hinted, the firm has been deceived too often to make any false delicacy necessary. Speak out, Miss Driscott. What do you want us to do?"

In a voice that was scarcely audible, she made her first demand.

"I must search your luggage, thoroughly. Also I must examine all papers in your pockets."

"To be treated like a common thief!" Shane burst out; but Vartan stopped him.

"We asked Miss Driscott for terms. Now we've got them. Turn out your pockets. Show her the linings—inside out. Come on! Get it over."

The examination proceeded in sultry silence. Theirs was the

only party in the breakfast room at the time; otherwise they would have adjourned to a more private place. Even the waiters had vanished after silently discharging their duties. Marjorie examined every scrap of paper. Her scrutiny was rapid. Evidently she knew by heart what she was looking for. Three personal letters were glanced at and tossed aside unread.

"Is that all?" Vartan demanded when she had put the last letter back in its envelope.

"Your watches, please."

They handed them over. Both were hunting watches.

"May I lift this picture?" she inquired of Vartan, exhibiting the photograph of a departed pet owl which Vartan had cherished for five years in outlandish wildernesses, only to lose it to a murderous cat in a Brooklyn rooming house.

"Certainly. Let me do it?"

"Thank you; I can manage."

Finding nothing under the picture, she put it back, closed the case, and returned the watch to Vartan. Shane's caused her less trouble, as it was unornamented at the time. Vartan rang for a waiter.

"Ask one of the desk clerks to come here," he directed when the waiter appeared. "Hand over your key," he ordered Shane, setting the example himself. Shane complied in a cold rage. "No good losing your temper about it," Vartan counselled. "We're in this thing to earn our wages. All this is part of the day's work."

To the desk clerk who answered the waiter's summons, Vartan casually addressed a rather startling request, as if it were a commonplace of daily life in an exclusive hotel.

"Miss Driscott wishes to examine some papers in our rooms before a business conference which we are to have with her in half an hour. Kindly send a chambermaid with her to our rooms while we wait out in the lobby."

The clerk stared. He knew who Marjorie was, because a cablegram from Brassey had informed the manager of the hotel that all her expenses would be paid by the firm's Bombay representative, and he had checked up by consulting the representative. From Vartan's accent he knew that the redheaded young man was an American, and therefore capable of almost anything. Deciding

that the proceeding was respectable but bizarre, he held his tongue and gave in.

It was a full half hour before Marjorie descended. Shane fumed; Vartan stared at the ceiling and let Shane talk himself dry. Why fuss? It was all part of the game, and they had scarcely begun to play.

From Marjorie's face when she rejoined them, Shane judged that she was satisfied. Her heartfelt sigh of relief as she handed back the keys was like a health certificate to the two suspects.

"Thank goodness that's over," she breathed.

"All satisfactory?" Vartan asked.

"Quite. Let us say no more about it."

"Is there anything else?"

"I'm afraid there is," she confessed. "Please be as nice about this as you were about the other."

"Go ahead," Vartan encouraged.

"This is the worst of all," she hesitated. "It sounds as if—oh, I don't know how to put it."

"Perhaps I can help you, Miss Driscott. You wish to satisfy your employer that my personal mission—my sealed orders—do not conflict with the firm's interests?"

"Oh, thank you, Mr. Vartan."

"But," Shane objected, "Vartan and Mr. Brassey seemed to understand one another perfectly on that point the day before we sailed."

"I know," she said. "But things have taken a serious turn since you left."

"In what way?"

"Mr. Brassey cabled five days ago that the slides stolen from Mr. Shane's laboratory have been returned by mail."

"What postmark on the package?" Vartan demanded coolly.

"London."

"Well," Shane remarked, "what of it? How does this affect us? The thieves probably found my slides worthless for their purposes."

"Apparently," Marjorie replied, watching Vartan's face steadily. "For they enclosed a typewritten note with the returned slides."

"To what effect?" Vartan asked with studied indifference.

"Do you really wish to know?" she asked, meeting his gaze.

"Yes? Then I shall have to tell you the unpleasant truth. The spies wrote this. 'Mr. Vartan's sealed orders are, in our opinion, of greater moment to Brassey House than are Mr. Shane's slides, important though the latter undoubtedly are. It would be to the advantage of Brassey House to learn the nature of Mr. Vartan's "sealed orders" before entrusting him with the proposed expedition.' Now, Mr. Vartan," she concluded, "you see that we must know definitely what your 'sealed orders' are before you start."

The men exchanged glances. Shane spoke up.

"Mr. Brassey asked you to question Mr. Vartan?"

"Yes." The reply was barely audible. Marjorie did not seem to enjoy this part of her job.

"Very well," Vartan volunteered. "I'll tell you." Her eyes met his in a steady, slightly hostile stare. "On one condition. Otherwise I take the next boat back to London." Her gaze never flickered. "I shall tell you," he said, "when you have told me exactly where we are going, and why. Take your time to think it over. So far you have made the terms. Now I am talking. For both of us."

She barely hesitated. "That is agreeable to us—to Mr. Brassey, that means. To make sure, I will cable."

"We start tonight?"

"At eight. The first stage will be by train, except the last thirty miles or so, which will be by motor car over a metalled road. So," she smiled, "you need fear no hardships for at least a week."

"You won't want us for the rest of the day?"

"Unless you care to have lunch with me?"

Shane accepted eagerly. Vartan begged off, hinting that two made better company than three.

"I want to take a run out to those interesting looking palisades behind the city that we saw from the boat. Shane can escort you to the cable office, and later see that you are properly fed."

Over their protests, he bundled them into a cab, asked the driver for the nearest cable office, and directed him to it.

"See you later," he cried, as the cab started. He watched them out of sight. Then he returned to the hotel lobby and asked the clerk to call a cab. When it came, he stepped in and gave the street number of a cable office. It was not that for which Marjorie was bound.

Arrived at the cable office, he inquired whether he could

cable to London and get an answer before seven o'clock that night.

"Certainly, sir, if the party in London replies promptly. You should receive an answer much sooner than that."

"Then I'll wait here." He wrote out a five word message to Charles Brassey, London, giving his own address as that of the cable office in which he was.

During the tedious wait he smoked and thought of Marjorie Driscott. He understood Shane's obvious adoration of her. Marjorie was a girl he could have fallen hopelessly in love with himself, had he, and not Shane, had the flying start of six months' friendship. But, although the expedition had not yet actually started, he already felt himself in command, and he deliberately put all softer thoughts behind him. He would let Shane reap the profit of his early start with Marjorie, and wait the outcome. They were probably about to say goodbye for a long spell to civilization within the next seven days. When the expedition returned it would be time enough to think of anything but work.

Shane's estimate of Marjorie, he admitted critically, was accurate up to a certain point. The precise point where Shane's 'looks plus publicity plus brains' ceased to be exact was what interested Vartan for the moment, and this doubt had inspired his cablegram. Publicity plus beauty have never yet seen a party of explorers safely over an unmapped expanse of the roughest country in the world. Vartan doubted Brassey's wisdom in letting his beautiful publicity agent and confidential secretary arrange the preliminaries of their hazardous undertaking. For, that it would prove to be dangerous, he had not the slightest doubt. Brassey's manner had hinted as much. Had Marjorie the necessary qualifications, in addition to beauty and facility with a pencil, for her important task? Her conduct of the examination of Shane and himself showed that she did not lack moral courage, at least, and he had no reason to doubt that she would prove equally courageous in the face of physical dangers.

The answer to his cablegram came sooner than he had expected. It was a simple "No," signed "Charles Brassey". Vartan shredded the slip into small pieces as he strode from the cable office, and strewed them along the gutter.

The monosyllabic answer had confirmed one of his first impressions. Marjorie had beauty. She also was an expert publicity agent. Otherwise Brassey would not have retained her. As

a confidential agent on a delicate and dangerous mission she had already proved herself competent. In one respect only did she fall short of perfection in Vartan's eyes.

The absence of a sense of wonder is, Vartan reflected, often a symptom of stupidity. To an imbecile all things are equal and monotonously alike. Proceeding from these general observations, Vartan thought it rather strange that Marjorie should have seen nothing astonishing in the return of Shane's stolen slides to Brassey.

"This is going to be more interesting than I thought," Vartan reflected as he hopped aboard a tram. "Now for a close look at those interesting basalt formations out yonder."

He spent the rest of the day in a mild orgy of geological sightseeing. Rejoining Shane and Marjorie in the hotel in time for dinner, he noted that they too had evidently enjoyed a pleasant day. With admirable efficiency, Marjorie had purchased their train tickets well in advance, so they lingered over their coffee and smokes till the last moment.

"Now, Miss Driscott," Vartan remarked as they rose to go, "I suppose it will be safe to tell us where our first stop is to be? If we're spies, or anything of that sort," he added with grim humor, "we couldn't betray any secrets now, with you right on our trail, could we?"

She gave him a searching look. "Remember," she replied, "you have not yet told us what your private orders are. Until you do, I cannot be blamed for carrying out my own instructions to the letter. Still," she continued with a disarming smile, "as you couldn't possibly communicate with any undesirables in time to do any harm now, I don't mind telling you where we are going."

From her handbag she produced the first of her articles on the 'Brassey Expedition' for the press. Vartan glanced through it, noting that it was dated from Darjiling.

"I see," he remarked with quiet satisfaction. "We are to make our way over—or into—the Himalayas by the well travelled routes. I thought when I first saw it that Brassey's marvellous delphinium must have come from somewhere near Sikkim. That's where the real flowers grow, isn't it?"

Her answer was a peal of delighted laughter.

"How simple you are!" she cried. "Darjiling? We're not going anywhere near it. Our first stop is Srinagar."

"In the Vale of Cashmere?"

"Where else? It will be paradise, they tell me," she laughed happily, "at this time of year."

"No doubt. But why on earth—?"

"Never mind now. I'll explain when we get there. Come on, Mr. Shane, or we'll miss that train."

4

THEIR HERITAGE

THEIR BRIEF STAY IN SRINAGAR WAS AT ITS MOST tranquilly beautiful season, the late spring, when the apricots were just going out of blossom and beginning to put forth their tender fingers of chrysoprase. In this placid valley of the mountains, set like a cool northern garden but a short journey from the torrid plains of India, the party laid their plans and discussed their chances of success.

"Why don't we stay here always?" Marjorie sighed. "Do you really want to lose yourselves in those terrible mountains?"

"They're more beautiful," Shane said simply, "Than all this valley with its pink and green and its sleepy blue pools and drowsy streams. This is merely pretty. Those masses behind us are something more. Not a cloud on them, only the shadows of clouds, and every imaginable hue of purple, rose and lavender mingling softly over the sheer blue and ochre of the drags and precipices. Give me the mountains; you may take the valley."

"But I shall have the mountains too," she teased, "if I stay down here while you two are discovering how all those fairy colors recede and fade as you approach them."

"You are coming, though, aren't you?" Vartan questioned seriously.

"Of course. I was only joking."

"It may be a pretty rough trip," Shane reminded her. "You will get cold to the point of freezing one day, crisped through like

fried bacon the next and—excuse me for mentioning it—you will become thoroughly dirty in a primitive, unwashable way."

"I shan't," she retorted. "If either of you men ever see me looking worse than I do now I'll pay for a banquet to the whole expedition, porters included, when we get back. We'll dine at the highest priced hotel in India, where they serve ham and eggs on gold platters."

"We're on," Vartan agreed. "If we lose, you feast for a week at our expense."

They were seated on the crumbling moss-grown parapet of an ancient courtyard surrounding the alligator tank or harem pool of some long departed rajah. A gnarled and venerable pomegranate tree sent its twisted roots burrowing through the dilapidated wall and sprawling agedly toward the water, and an enormous almond, hoary with the lichens of age, dropped its unmelting snow upon the unrippled surface of the water, black as obsidian glass. Here surely was peace absolute and life as it should be lived. Thinking of nothing, and letting their eyes feast, they sat silently revelling in an ecstasy of pure sensation. Gradually, a faint, deep drone echoed down from a distant blue chasm in the mighty range behind the little town, and they woke from their reveries.

"The mail plane," said Marjorie. "There it is, buzzing past the gorge."

"Progress," Vartan commented ironically.

"Yes, damn it," Shane retorted.

The silver thread connecting their lives with the timeless past of the dead was broken. Once more they become modern, alive, anxious, and essentially futile.

"Well," Marjorie sighed, "shall we get to work and do what we came out here for? It is private enough, Heaven knows." She opened her handbag and extracted a small leather roll, not unlike a diminutive music case. "This is the document of which I spoke yesterday evening."

"Mr. Brassey's last will and testament, as it were?" Shane remarked jocularly. Marjorie did not respond in kind.

"It is sadder than a will," she said. "Even the saddest will usually makes some one happier—after a time. This is of a different sort. It is like the farewell of a leper before he is banished to a living death. Will you read it, Mr. Vartan?"

Vartan took the closely written roll wonderingly from her

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hand. He had not expected a turn like this. Still less had he anticipated Marjorie's revelation, which she had just given, of another, softer, unbusinesslike side to her character. Then, suddenly, the spectacle of the loathsome fakir they had seen in Bombay flashed across his memory. As if she had read his thoughts, Marjorie recalled the incident as he prepared to read.

"I know," she began in a low voice, "you thought me queer the other morning when I asked you to look at that bundle of rags in the gutter."

Vartan nodded; Shane loyally shook his head with vigor, and Marjorie continued.

"Perhaps you recall what I said about that pitiful creature?"

"You remarked," Shane replied at once, "that fanaticism is worse than drink, drugs, or delirium."

"You also, if I remember correctly," Vartan cut in, "followed my lead by refusing to subsidize a fraud by contributing to its support. Why?"

"Because," she murmured, "I was reminded of poor Mr. Brassey. You will see how when you read what is in your hand. He himself wrote it."

"Shall I begin?"

She nodded, and Vartan began reading aloud, in as impersonal a voice as he could master, the moving history of James Brassey, written by his younger brother Charles.

" 'To those men, whoever they may be, who may undertake the search in Central Asia for living specimens of *Delphinium Brasseii.*

" 'You who read this will have successfully passed the most exacting tests it is in my power to devise. By every means known to me, I have investigated your integrity, and I find you worthy of the trust I now place in you. It has been part of my plan from the beginning to send with you a personal representative whom I can trust implicitly, in order that his presence might constantly remind you of your obligations to Brassey House.'

"There is a pencil note here on the margin," Vartan broke off, "to the effect that no suitable man being found for the position, Mr. Brassey has relied upon his trusted and tried confidential secretary, Miss Marjorie Driscott."

There was no comment, and Vartan continued with his reading.

" 'It is a serious and sometimes humiliating thing to reveal

family secrets. Nevertheless it is my duty to disclose at least one of the secrets of the Brassey family and that, I assure you, the darkest, in order that the intrepid men now listening to our tragic history may enter upon their task with open eyes.

" 'We are an old family. Our ancestors on both sides are recorded in the Domesday Book, and well authenticated tradition, substantiated by heirlooms and priceless relics from Saxon times, carries back our origins to the year 410 A.D., when the last Roman garrison was withdrawn from Britain. Our history has been an honorable one. But for our misfortune, or curse, as some might call it, our family might well have ruled England in its early days and have helped to govern the British Empire in its maturity.

" 'Our curse has been a taint of madness, inherited from an impure and alien stock, crossed with our own by marriage in the year 1100. Definite records attest this fact beyond any reasonable dispute.

" 'It is only recently that the laws of heredity have begun to yield to science. Mendel's great discovery of 1865 lay buried for thirty five years; the last quarter century has discovered him again and swept far beyond his tremendous advance. But this is not the place to expound what breeders of plants and animals have gleaned from their multitudes of experiments. I allude to this scientific work merely to enhance, in the minds of those familiar with it, the cold reality of the tragedy of our own history, and of our future, which we foresee with mathematical exactness, and which we are powerless to avert. Let me remind you briefly of the science.

" 'Few of the laws of human inheritance have been disentangled with the same thoroughness as have those of certain minute flies, whose life span, from birth to death, is about nine days. Therefore it is impossible to say with certainty whether any type of human madness is inheritable from generation to generation according to the Mendelian law.

" 'Long before Mendel published his epoch-making discovery in 1865, the painstaking annalists of my unfortunate family had observed a fatal regularity in the occurrence of madness, or at least a 'queerness', in the successive generations of our house. Our records, complete from the year 1100, and tracing thousands of human lives from birth to death, for nearly nine hundred years, will offer to future biologists, when the last of our main line is extinct, a field richer by far than that of ephemeral vinegar flies for the

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study of heredity, and richer even than the curiously elaborate family trees of Charles Darwin and Abraham Lincoln.

" 'As early as 1300 our chroniclers made bold to predict that at least one child of certain unions would show the taint inherited from the initial pollution of 1100; by 1500, profiting from previous predictions, the chroniclers were foretelling what marriages or intermarriages among us would produce sane offspring, and what tainted. They paid particular attention to what they called the main trunk, of which my brother and I are the last offshoots.

" 'My brother James was born in 1889; I, in 1894. At the time of my brother's birth, the family records predicted an even chance that he would inherit the taint. The same odds applied of course to myself.

" 'On coming of age, my brother was shown the family history. After studying it exhaustively for six months, and verifying its sombre tragedy as best he might from old legal documents and parish records, he announced his decision to remain a bachelor for life. This I learned from my father at my own coming of age in 1915. Dispassionate scrutiny of our records for the past two hundred years only convinced me that the taint inherited from 1100 still resided in our germ cells. I followed my brother's lead and renounced all thought of marriage, although at the time I was engaged to be married. The details of that broken engagement are of no concern here; suffice to say that the injured party married shortly after, and has, as far as I can ascertain, lived happily ever since. As my brother and I were the only children of our parents, we knew that the taint, so far at least as it affected the main trunk of our family, would expire with us.' "

Vartan paused, to rest his eyes on the azure and rose of the mountains.

"Toss me a cigarette, someone. Thanks, Miss Driscott. Do you want to read the rest, Shane? No? All right; I'll go on till one of you feels like relieving me." Before reading the next paragraph he glanced through it. A less cautious man would have betrayed the emotions induced in him by that startingly frank avowal. Vartan showed nothing.

" 'Fully warned of what might be in store for us with advancing age—the taint rarely appeared in marked form before the age of twenty-five—James and I kept strict watch on ourselves and on each other. We agreed that should either of us show any

symptoms of queerness, that one should immediately leave the country and seclude himself in some place where his friends could never see him.

" 'During the first world war both James and I were called to the Foreign Office, as our work at Brassey House had given us an intimate knowledge of certain conditions in the Orient. While there in 1917 my brother broke. He was then twenty eight years of age; I, twenty three. His malady first manifested itself in a peculiarly subtle form. He persisted that I was spying on him and that I was unduly suspicious of all his actions. As a matter of fact it was my poor brother who had become morbidly suspicious of me. I confided the truth to our father, who agreed with me. Although it broke my heart, I seconded my father's sentence of banishment for James. I shall not record the painful scene of our leave taking, nor shall I put down the bitter humor with which James accepted his tragic fate. He sailed from England for Bombay on the eighteenth of April, 1917, vowing that we should never hear of him again until the day of his death. Needless to say he carried with him ample funds for the necessities of decent living. With reasonable thrift he might have retired to some pleasant spot, such as the Vale of Cashmere, and lived a happy, useful life collecting and studying the flowering plants he loved and understood as few men have ever understood them. James was a botanist of the first rank.' "

"This is the place," Marjorie said, when Vartan paused. "But I suppose he was too bitter to rest anywhere."

"Or too energetic," Vartan remarked enigmatically. "Shall I go on?" They nodded.

" 'After James' departure, I asked and obtained my generous father's permission to devote my life to biological research. That was in 1918, almost a quarter of a century after the rediscovery of Mendel's immortal papers on heredity in peas. As an undergraduate at Cambridge, I had been attracted to biology, and had come under the stimulating influence of that great but little known teacher, John Mason, who was my private tutor. From a careful study of his minutely patient researches—never published, unfortunately—on the nuclei of plant cells, I dreamed a great dream, and I saw a great vision. To realize that dream and to attain the vision became the passion of my life. But the long, gray hand clutched me.'

"It always does," Vartan observed quietly, looking up. "The dream remains a dream, and the vision is blurred by gross reality. Only young men live; the rest of us become practical and mortify into everlasting respectability."

"You are still young," Marjorie murmured. "And you have your 'sealed orders'. Those are your own dream, are they not?"

"Mine and another man's," he admitted. "The other man preferred respectability. It remains to be seen whether I too am overtaken by it before I reach his age. However, this is by the way. To continue with Mr. Brassey's confession, or revelation, or whatever we care to call it.

" 'My dream has been partly realized by others, partly changed into something more deeply hidden than I imagined in the first flush of my hopeful youth, and I have had no part in it. Grave obligations which I could only accept as part of my inheritance, forced my life into channels less pleasant than the even flow of science. To my fellow enthusiasts in London and Cambridge I appeared as merely another somewhat promising young man seduced by man's immortal lust for gold. Those who called themselves my friends reported what was said of me behind my back. Heredity, according to this idle gossip, had conquered me; my brief excursion into the fairy realm of science had been but the futile digression of a man doomed by generations of moneymakers to follow in their plodding footsteps. In the specific taunt the gossips were in error; in their general thesis they were, alas, fatally correct, although they never learned, I trust, the brutal accuracy of their random arrow. A merciless hand had reached out of the past, nine hundred years almost, to pluck up my life and cast it aside to wither when it had barely taken root. To explain my defection I must digress briefly on the history of our great establishment—for *it is* great, in a humble way.

" 'Brassey House was founded in 1776 by my grandfather's father, who was one of the first Europeans to see the unsurpassable floral glories of Sikkim; long before the immortal Hooker described the wonders of that enchanted hothouse of the world, my adventursome ancestor recorded them in glowing detail. I need not recount the records of his explorations, undertaken on leaves of absence from the East India Company, for they are readily accessible, and are indeed one of the classics of botanical exploration. It suffices here to state that many of the treasures of Kew Gardens were first

introduced to English flower lovers by him, and that out of his collections of seeds grew Brassey House, whose seeds are welcomed the world over wherever gardens grow. Not only was a great business founded by those few bags of exotic seeds in 1776, but also a great tradition.

" 'That tradition, as the struggling business took root and branched out into a sturdy tree, became synonymous with the honor of our family. To maintain the tradition, no member of the family has felt that any sacrifice of personal ambition was more than might be justly demanded of him. The business, in short, Brassey House, *is* the family.

" 'My abandonment of the career I would have chosen in happier circumstances was therefore inevitable when, in the autumn of 1922, my father first gave evidence of an unbalanced mind. His disorder began just as had my poor brother's, in a mild mania of suspicion. Six months after the first symptoms appeared, the physicians declared his case hopeless, and shortly afterward he died in a private hospital. At the end his affliction took a greviously painful turn, and he died in the delusion that I had betrayed both him and James while I myself was the one, and the only one, who had inherited the taint. In his distress he even accused me of having poisoned the minds of his own physicians and attendants against him.

" 'I set all this down without reservation in order that you men who now hear it may withdraw, if you so wish, before seriously committing yourselves to my project. In the event that you do withdraw, I trust to your honor to read no further, and to hold sacred what you have so far heard.' "

Vartan looked up. His eyes met Shane's.

"Well?"

"You are the leader," Shane replied.

"Technically, yes. But we haven't yet reached the stage where one man's word must be law. What would you do? Read the rest?"

"Yes," Shane snapped.

"You, Miss Driscott?"

"I don't know what I would do if I were a man. But I do know what I actually did when Mr. Brassey gave me only this much of his confession—if you care to call it that—to read first. I accepted the responsibility and asked for the rest. That is why I am here."

"Would you do the like again, knowing what you now know?"

"Probably. That is, if I still remained a woman."

"The vote then is two to one, or say one and a half to one, as Miss Driscott doesn't seem quite sure of her mind. This is too serious a matter to be settled by half a vote. I'll let you know my decision in the morning."

He rolled up the manuscript and returned it to Marjorie.

"Aren't you afraid," she asked demurely, "that Mr. Shane will find out what's in the rest of this before morning?"

The question, apparently a harmless joke, startled him. He glanced at Shane. The latter was admiring Marjorie's profile. More than ever, he thought, he must use caution before coming to a decision.

"I'm not suspicious," he answered meaningly.

If Marjorie's innocent remark had startled Vartan, his seemed for a second to devastate her. Fortunately Shane had turned his attention to the incredible hues of the sunset blazing on the icy pinnacles of the mountains. She recovered instantly.

"We can be trusted," she laughed gaily. "Hadn't we better hurry back to the hotel? It will be dark before we get there."

"You and Shane go on. I want to watch the last of the sunset. Don't wait dinner for me; I may stroll back the long way."

They seemed happy enough to leave him with the dying sunset and his thoughts.

5

A DUEL

VARTAN COULD NOT SLEEP. HE SPENT THE LONG, moonless night roaming through the scented byways of the valley, trying desperately to reach a calm, rational decision regarding his course of action. Should he go on with this expedition after Brassey's unconscious revelations? Would it not be wiser to abandon the project now, and trust to his own wits to get him, somehow, to his secret destination without the aid of Brassey's money? "You will be followed," Brassey had prophesied before they left the London office, and Vartan now felt the full impact of the prediction. They were being followed, not by the spies whom Brassey seemed to anticipate, but by another, whose cold persistence was less easily shaken off. The thing pursuing them was intangible but real, and it had started its unerring journey centuries before the oldest member of the expedition was born, in the year 1100.

They had been two days in Srinagar, waiting for the last details of their transport to be perfected. As usual nowadays, all travelling arrangements had been delegated to a firm of experts whose business it was to outfit expeditions of all degrees of danger or difficulty, from an easy tourist jaunt of two weeks into the mountains, to elaborate caravans whose precise destination in the heart of Asia was nebulous, but which expected their explorations to occupy any time from two to five years. The Brassey expedition was of the latter variety. Messrs. Brathwaite, the outfitters, were

instructed by Brassey's agents to provide transport and supplies for a scientific expedition lasting two years, much of it probably through unexplored mountainous regions, with possibly a short digression into desert territory. The sterling reputation of Brassey House, and its honorable record of many previous seed collecting expeditions brilliantly carried through without the loss of a single life, opened official doors and made the issuing of passports and letters of recommendation to governors of provinces a matter of routine. As for the rest, the purchase of supplies and the hiring of porters, Messrs. Brathwaite took all bother off their hands. The start, at any rate, would be as simple as stepping aboard a Pullman.

There remained at this late moment only the most urgent question of all. Should they go on with it? If Brassey's "No" to Vartan's query had settled one uneasy question in Vartan's mind, reading of his strange "confession" had raised a host to supplant it. And there was the matter of Marjorie's alleged publicity campaign which cast a sinister shadow over the whole doubtful venture.

Marjorie had calmly explained her part on their first afternoon in Srinagar. In answer to Vartan's question why her first dispatch to the press was dated from Darjiling, instead of from Srinagar whence the actual start would be made, Marjorie had elucidated her role with charming frankness.

"Mr. Brassey has told you," she reminded her companions, "that he has been troubled for years by spies infesting his business. You yourselves saw one instance. For very good reasons, he suspects that these same spies will spare no pains to learn the outcome of our expedition. On Mr. Brassey's orders, I have advertised profusely for over a year that our expedition is to start from Darjiling and gradually work its way to the highlands of Tibet. That, of course, is not at all the direction we shall take. But it is the region, we hope, in which our enemies will begin searching for what we hope to find."

"Which is?" Shane interrupted.

"Not now," she smiled. "Mr. Brassey told you—a shovelful of earth from a particular place. To throw our competitors completely off the scent, Mr. Brassey devised a simple, ingenious scheme. He instructed me to advertise widely our contract with Northfields' for news and movie rights. According to my stories we are taking with us a powerful radio outfit to send back at

least weekly progress reports to the nearest British station. This of course is to be supplemented by runners when the expedition gets so far into the mountains that the radio becomes ineffective.

"Now," she continued with charming frankness, "all this of course is just a fairy story. We have no radio, and we shall send back no runners. But Northfields' will continue to receive fairly regular reports—not too regular, of course, or the realistic effect would be spoiled—of our terribly exciting adventures in the wilderness. The public will eat them up. I know, because I have written all the reports myself, and I have a pretty fair knowledge of what the average stay at home likes beside the evening fire. You, Mr. Shane, will break a leg by a fall into a crevasse exactly three weeks from today. Our heroic commissar, none other than the redoubtable Mohammed—all organizers and leaders of caravans are called Mohammed in the proper technique—will risk his own life, and almost lose it—twice—to fish you safely out of the evil crack in the glacier. Then you will be patiently carried on a litter by four sturdy hillsmen for six weeks of silent suffering, while you heroically direct the collecting of innumerable plant fossils hitherto unknown to science."

"But I say," Shane interrupted, "what the devil am I to do when the Paleobotanical Society asks to see the fossils when we get home?"

"I have thought of that too," she laughed. "You are just getting strong again, and able to walk, although a trifle shakily, when a stupid porter lets his pony train slip over an icy precipice, dumping all your priceless specimens into a raging, boiling mountain torrent. In your grief at the loss, you plunge into the cataract—"

"By jumping off the precipice? It's a bit too thick."

"Of course not. You are lowered by ropes, and just escape drowning. It is all useless however, and your unique fossils are irretrievably lost."

"And what about me?" Vartan asked. "I break my neck, I suppose, and am brought back to life by an eight hundred year old lama in a Tibetan monastery?"

"Not quite. You eat wild rhubarb, although Mohammed warns you not to, and you have a terrible time—out of your head for weeks."

"Is that all?" Vartan asked drily.

"Not quite. I must leave something to Northfields' readers'

imaginations. Then, when you and Mr. Shane are both worthless, I assume charge of the expedition. My public now really begins to take notice. Can't you see the headlines? I can, because I have written them all myself. 'Girl Leader Braves Blizzard. Blown Over Precipice On Kinchinjinga. Rescued By Porter.' The stories I have written while I am in command will double Northfields' innumerable circulations. Not one of them is true," she concluded simply.

"You mean to say," Vartan asked, "that all your publicity is to be nothing more nor less than a gigantic hoax?"

"Why not call it a joke instead? Northfields will get what they are paying for—a thriller. The public will enjoy it far better than a dreary account of the truth—'thirty miles today; barometer so-and-so; wet bulb thermometer the same; wind eighty miles an hour from the northeast; two porters with lame backs, one with trench feet.' "

"It seems to me," Vartan objected quietly, "that this comes pretty near plain fraud."

"What about the spies who have made poor Mr. Brassey's life miserable all these years?" she flashed. "We are on an important mission. Why should we deliberately court failure when we can avoid at least one danger with harm to nobody?"

"The end justifies the means? Very well; if that is your philosophy and Mr. Brassey's, I have nothing to day. All philosophies are on a par; yours is as good as any of them. So these bogus progress reports are to be released one at a time on the gullible public after we have left?"

"If you choose to put it rudely, yes. I have left the complete series, enough for two years, with representatives in India whom Mr. Brassey knows he can trust. And further, if you really care to know," she added defiantly, "the same agents are keeping a complete and exciting battery of films to be exhibited after we return. They were taken five years ago by the Brassey expedition to the Pamirs, and have never been shown outside our London offices, where they were exhibited to an audience of exactly five. I was one. That, partly, is why I have done so well on my radio reports. When you read them, you will admit the same."

Although Shane's loyalty to Marjorie made him more lenient than Vartan, it did not blind him to the queer color of the whole crooked transaction. Had Marjorie been a man, and not a charming

young woman with whom he was in love, the impulsive Shane would forthwith have punched her on the jaw and told her to go to hell with her fishy game. His common sense however was blinded by his emotions, and he failed to realize that a double-crosser is but seldom particular in the choice of victims.

Vartan, on the other hand, was intrigued by Marjorie's candid avowal of a shrewd business move. Like her, he believed in safe-guarding his employer's interests so long as he accepted wages. But there is a limit, even to loyalty, and Vartan seriously doubted whether he, in a similar case, would have gone to the length that Marjorie did to play Brassey's game for him.

The decisive factor in Vartan's case was Brassey's "No" to his telegram. Crooked dealing or straight, he would stay with the game and see Brassey, the plaything of a remorseless fate, through to as happy a conclusion as possible. That monosyllable "No" was more persuasive than volumes of fervid eloquence. It moved Vartan to his decision, which was to change forever the current of life for one of their party, where labored explanations and irrefutable logic would have but left him cold.

All this came back to Vartan as he tramped the lanes about Srinagar. His decision had crystallized. He had wrestled in the dark nearly ten hours. The first fires of the coming dawn kindled the cold peaks of the mountains, long before the valley hinted of light, and here and there an anxious bird, sensing the advent of its god, chirped shrilly to welcome the tardy sun. Vartan wheeled to face the mountains before turning his back on them to make his way to the hotel. Their morning splendor had come upon them suddenly. Involuntarily he uncovered his head, and stood at attention.

"Into it!" he said, turning away at last.

Only two porters and the night clerk were about when he reached the hotel. From the kitchen wing the clatter of an occasional pot or pan presaged the stately ritual of breakfast, but it was still two hours in the future. For once in his life Vartan felt that he could relish an English breakfast of the classic type. He hurried off to his room to shave, bathe, and change his dew-sodden clothes.

Neither Shane nor Marjorie suspected him of an all night vigil. They rallied him, however, on his Himalayan appetite. Marjorie was in high spirits.

"A clerk from Brathwaites' left this at the desk for me," she announced, exhibiting a pink slip. "It says that we can start tonight, if we like."

"Shall we?" Shane asked.

She hesitated before replying. "It depends," she said, between sips of steaming coffee, "on Mr. Vartan."

"How?" Vartan demanded bluntly.

"Let's enjoy our breakfast first," she pleaded. But Vartan was obdurate.

"Explain yourself," he said coldly.

Quick to note the change in his manner, she became efficient, but in a charmingly feminine way.

"Don't you remember, Mr. Vartan?" Her tone was intensely serious. "We cannot start until you treat Mr. Brassey as fairly as he has treated you."

"I have decided," Vartan declared, "to read the rest of Mr. Brassey's charge to us. Is that what you mean?"

"It is necessary. But not sufficient. After you have heard our side, we must hear yours. Before we can start, you must tell us precisely what your 'sealed orders' are. Have you forgotten? We reached such an agreement before we left the hotel in Bombay."

"Oh, of course! Excuse me," he begged ironically, "for forgetting." He turned to Shane. "Do you happen to remember exactly what I was saying that day when I lunched with you at Brasseys', just before your precious old white horse brought in the coffee?"

"Sure," Shane responded. "It was something about sealed orders."

Vartan turned to Marjorie. She met his gaze unflinchingly.

"Get the point?" he asked.

"I do," she retorted with a show of anger. "And I shall insist that you cable to Mr. Brassey the moment we rise from this table. Ask him whether I am trustworthy. You can get an answer by noon today."

Vartan dropped his eyes. "I apologise," he said. "It will be unnecessary. Is that enough?"

Marjorie was too angry to reply. Shane shuffled uneasily and kicked Vartan under the table. Vartan took the hint.

"I'm terribly sorry, Miss Driscott," he apologised. "I really didn't know you're out of sorts this morning—you look just

like a Cashmere almond in blossom; so it isn't my fault. Am I pardoned?"

"You are," she smiled, "although you don't deserve to be. Didn't what we read yesterday afternoon make any impression on your skeptical mind? Can't you see how terrible it is for one to coddle his suspicions? Think of what happened to poor James Brassey, and to our Mr. Brassey's father. As Shakespeare said—'that way lies madness'."

"I know," he admitted. "But," and he compelled her to meet his gaze, "I am not naturally suspicious."

She sized him up coldly.

"Will you cable?"

"I have said that it is unnecessary."

"When Vartan says that," Shane cut in, "it means 'nothing doing'."

"I insist upon a definite answer. Unless you give it, Mr. Vartan, I refuse to go on with this."

"You wish a plain yes or no?"

Marjorie nodded.

"It is unnecessary," Vartan repeated.

For a moment it seemed as if their project had suffered shipwreck. Shane saved the situation.

"Vartan has no manners, but he does have red hair. Ever try to make a redheaded man say 'No' when he really wants to, but doesn't know how?"

Marjorie laughed. The day was saved, and Vartan's masculine honor left intact. That, at least, was Shane's interpretation of the incident. Vartan had scored his point, simply because he was almost passionately obstinate. Marjorie, out of sorts, had yielded merely to avoid an unnecessary scene.

They rose to go into the lobby to smoke, as it was still rather chilly outside, and too early for a morning ramble.

"Shall we stroll out to that enchanted garden this morning and finish reading Mr. Brassey's will—as Mr. Vartan calls it?"

"I'm on," Shane agreed enthusiastically.

"All right. I'll run up and get the roll. The sun is tipping those poplars already."

"Don't trouble," said Vartan, rising. "We'll read the rest some night in camp. Tonight, possibly, if we're not too tired."

"What do you mean?" she flashed.

"Simply this. The expedition has started. Your things are packed. You told me so yesterday. So are ours. Except your personal effects, all of our gear is ready to go forward now. You have ten minutes to change your clothes."

"But we don't start till tonight," she protested. "Ali told us yesterday it is not safe to attempt the pass when the sun is up. Avalanches—"

"Shane and I know our business. We're no greenhorns at mountaineering."

"You don't yet know what route Mr. Brassey wishes you to take," she demurred with a trace of defiance. "And until I see fit to tell you, you won't guess."

"I don't need to guess. There is one and only one way out of this valley into the heart of the mountains, and over them, unless we head back to the plains of India. That would be foolish, as we just left them behind us. So we shall start up the Baltoro pass in half an hour. I'll give the headman his orders."

"I refuse to move!"

"Very well. Stay here."

"I shall cable at once to Mr. Brassey and he will cut off your supplies. A word from him will be sufficient to Brathwaites' ".

She moved toward the desk to take up the telephone.

"What are you going to do?"

"Telephone a message to the telegraph office."

"Better not, Miss Driscott," he advised, looking her steadily in the eyes. "Mr. Brassey put me in charge of this expedition."

"Your command to become effective," she retorted, her hand upon the receiver, "only when the pack train has actually started."

"You are wasting time," he said. "Shane, go and give the headman his order to start."

Shane turned on his heel like a soldier and walked out. Vartan was alone with Marjorie and the telephone.

"I suppose you think you are being very masculine and masterful," she scoffed. "The only impression you make on me is that of a rash young man exceeding his authority and disobeying his employer's instructions."

"Are you going to use that telephone?"

She searched his face with a level stare before replying.

"If I do," she asked, "what will you do?"

"I'll go that far to meet you," Vartan retorted, "although

only a common decency and sense of fair play compel me to answer. You said you always play straight. So do I. If you use that telephone, I shall wait till you finish what you have to say."

"And then?"

"I shall use it."

She relinquished the instrument and turned away to go to her room.

"We both win," she laughed happily. "If you had backed down then I should have cabled Mr. Brassey to recall you. The man in command of our party must have backbone."

"Enough to override technical orders when they become dangerous nuisances? This absurd stipulation of Mr. Brassey's, for instance, that we shall not start till we have heard the rest of his history?"

"Yes."

"Then that's settled." She had started to mount the stairs. "By the way," he called after her, "is there a telephone in your room?"

For a second she hesitated.

"Why do you hesitate?" he asked quietly, going up to her. A flash of animal fear lit up her eyes, and died instantly, leaving them calm and candidly blue, staring into his own.

"Because," she replied in a low tone, "I am afraid of suspicion."

"On account of Mr. Brassey and his brother James?"

"And their father."

"I see. Six years in the atmosphere of Brassey House. That's enough for any normal person."

"I knew you would understand," she breathed, the strange light again flickering uncertainly across her eyes. "To start fair, I shall send a chambermaid to my room to get my things."

"Perhaps you had better. You can change your clothes at Brathwaites'. There must be a room."

It was so arranged. Less than an hour later they were on their way toward the pass.

"What were you and Marjorie confabbing about so long?" Shane asked when he and Vartan were out of earshot of the pack train.

"Whether she would be permitted to take along a vanity case, or something of the sort, the size of a young trunk."

"You let her, of course?"

"Not exactly. I put it up to her, and she left it behind at the hotel."

"Marjorie is a good sport," Shane commented warmly. "Just look at her stepping out with old Ali Baba, or whatever his name is. By the way, just why is she coming with us, if the radio publicity is a myth?"

"Because Brassey gave her whatever definite instructions we are to get."

"She could have passed them on. We're not imbeciles."

"Perhaps not. But Brassey doesn't seem to trust anyone but Miss Driscott."

"Well, I hope she doesn't cave in and have to be carried on a litter."

"She won't," Vartan assured him. "That girl has grit, and lots of it. Besides, women explorers are no great novelty nowadays. Didn't the Countess Alberti tramp all over these mountains with two white men and twenty coolies? We've got forty, not counting old Ali Baba. Miss Driscott will get there."

"You bet she will!"

Vartan strode on in silence, feeling as if he had just won a duel. What Marjorie felt, she kept to herself, or confided to the grizzled Ali Baba, whose English was eloquent but of limited range.

6

RED LEAVES

TWELVE WEEKS OF ARDUOUS BUT SAFE CLIMBING lay behind the party of forty three men and one woman. Everything had moved with the perfect regularity of well oiled machinery, thanks to Messrs. Brathwaites' experience and efficiency. Thus far there had not been a single case of sickness, and not a murmur from the sturdy porters under old Ali Baba's direction. Except for an occasional cairn sheltering a benchmark on some distant peak —the seal of the all but ubiquitous British Survey—they had seen no signs of human beings.

After the start, Vartan took complete charge and full responsibility. Shane set Marjorie an excellent example by obeying his leader's orders instantly and without comment of any kind. From their explorations in the Andes, Shane knew that Vartan was a cool commander who could be bold and daring to the limit on necessity.

At first Marjorie was inclined to be rebellious and, it must be admitted, treated herself to a prolonged spell of sulks. Beyond answering when spoken to, she addressed no remarks to the rather taciturn leader of the expedition. Vartan either did not notice her huff, or deliberately let it work itself out in grueling physical exercise. As he had anticipated, Marjorie's curiosity eventually got the better of her. It was on the evening of their seventy third day out that Marjorie capitulated. They had just descended an easy five thousand foot slope through thickets of glorious crimson

and gold rhododendrons in full bloom, and were now about to make camp for the night under the tented branches of a deodar forest. Vartan at the moment stood idly watching the efficient Ali Baba bossing the weary porters into one last spurt of energy. Marjorie emerged from behind a pile of pack boxes and walked resolutely up to her chief.

"I suppose you know where you are, and where you are going?" she demanded. It was the first time she had spoken to Vartan beyond briefly answering an occasional necessary question.

"I do," he replied. "Would you care to see the map?"

She nodded, and he carefully selected a large, folded map, mounted on stout canvas and faced with transparent waterproof paper, from a thick bundle of similar maps which he carried habitually in a back pocket. As he unfolded the map for her inspection, she watched him curiously. When finally the map lay before her, she studied it critically in silence for a few seconds. Then, with a sharp exclamation, she pointed to the lower left corner.

"Where did you get this map?" she demanded.

Without a word, Vartan turned the map over and indicated the legend stamped on its reverse. "Property of the American Geological Exploration Society. Not for circulation or publication. Central Asiatic Expedition of 1914."

"You are following this?"

He nodded. "So far we have come by well travelled trails. Tomorrow we branch off toward here," he pointed to the lower left corner of the map, "where only two men, Marsden and Enright of our 1914 expedition, have ever penetrated."

"Nineteen fourteen," she mused. "James Brassey sailed from Liverpool for Bombay on the eighteenth of April, 1917—three years after this expedition. When did Marsden and Enright return to America?"

"The fourth of January, 1915."

"Then James could have heard of this map. He might even have seen a photograph of it," she suggested.

"It is possible, of course. But I regard it as so improbable a chance as to be entirely negligible. This map was prepared by Marsden and Enright under Mr. Grimsby's direction. There was no duplicate made."

"Why?" she asked in a curiously alert tone.

"Because Mr. Grimsby thought the geological—paleontolog-

ical, to be exact—information indicated on it is so sensational that it should not be published until verified."

"And that is what you hope to do?"

"Not exactly. I accept the results of Marsden and Enright as facts. My hope is to discover an explanation of those facts by examining certain fossils *in situ*."

"Is it possible," she persisted, "that James Brassey could have seen this map or a copy of it?"

"Absolutely no. It has been kept under lock in Mr. Grimsby's safe from the day it left the cartographer's hands till the day it passed into mine. Only Mr. Grimsby and I have ever seen it. Shane, of course, now knows it thoroughly. The cartographer doesn't count; he merely made this map as part of his routine along with the others of the Marsden-Enright expedition. The rest of those maps were all published over twenty-five years ago."

"I wonder," she said.

"What about?" he encouraged.

"It seems like a wild coincidence." She unfastened the cylindrical tin box, such as plant collectors sling over their shoulders, from its strap, and opened the lid. "I carry all my important papers here," she explained.

" I have noticed," he smiled, "that you never let that tin can out of your sight. As you never seem to put any plants or seeds into it, I inferred that it was your vanity case."

She ignored his pleasantry, and drew forth a small, crudely drawn map.

"This was made," she elucidated, "from the vague hints in James Brassey's last letter to Charles Brassey, pieced out by such information as our previous expeditions have gathered."

Vartan took the rough map and compared it with his own.

"There is a similarity," he admitted. "but this map is all white—unknown territory—just at the crucial part where mine is most detailed." He again pointed to the lower left hand corner of his own map. "Marsden and Enright made their most interesting discoveries down here. Evidently the men who drew your map never even dreamed of this region."

"They were unsuccessful," she said slowly.

"Your explorers found no plant even faintly resembling *Delphinium Brassei*?"

"They all failed completely," she repeated. "Still, it is a co-

incidence that your own 'sealed orders' should lead you into the same region as our men explored in vain."

"My 'sealed orders' again," he laughed. "Now that we are well started, I shan't mind telling you what they are."

"When?" she asked sharply.

"Any time you like. What about tonight? Shane and I have not yet heard the end of Charles Brassey's confession—if you care to call it that. This is a dismal place. I hate these colorless, drooping, dripping deodars. Suppose we build a roaring fire tonight, and finish the reading we began twelve weeks ago in Srinagar?"

"It would be delightful," she sighed. "I'm chilled to the bone, and I'm so tired of these puttees and riding breeches. Shall I dress for the occasion? Like a civilized woman, I mean?"

"Shane will go out of his head if you do," Vartan laughed. "But do it, anyway. Hullo! Speaking of Shane, here he is."

Before Shane, toiling up the long slope, could join them, Vartan rapidly concluded his observations on his own map and Brassey's.

"You talk of coincidence," he said. "Not at all. If you understood the scientific clues in Brassey's delphinium and my—or rather Marsden and Enright's—fossils, you would see that I have done the obvious thing in taking the route I have chosen. You thought me headstrong and contemptuous of Mr. Brassey's wishes when we left Srinagar, didn't you?"

She nodded. "You were. For all I know as yet, you still are."

"I'm not!" he retorted, his red hair bristling ominously.

"You are!" she smiled. "Now."

"Wait and see. I repeat, anyone putting two and two together, my fossils and Mr. Brassey's peerless delphinium, would do exactly as I have done. That is," he qualified, "if he had an iota of scientific sense."

Shane, joining them, had caught the last.

"He would not, Vartan," he asserted, "unless he were the sort of fakir who jumps at the first sensational theory he imagines."

"What do you mean?" Vartan demanded, suddenly taken aback. Marjorie regarded her companions closely, a cold scrutiny hardening her blue eyes.

"You know," Shane retorted. "Told you in London. Could have shown you in my slides, if old White Horse and his female

accomplice had not made off with them at the critical moment. You're not wrong. Neither is Brassey. But neither of you is right. Both of you are just beside the point. Get my meaning?"

"We're on the wrong track?"

"On the right track. Wrong direction. Go back. Not forward."

"To Srinagar?"

"Hell, no! To the beginning of geologic time, when this soggy spot we're sinking into was white hot gas."

"Honestly, Shane, I think the altitude has affected your mind."

"You do? And you think your own hypothesis is crazy too—'preposterous', you call it. Well, you're no fit judge of mine. I don't care how insane yours may be, I back my own to go it half a dozen better. And I'm going to check up on it in the next thirty six hours. Provided you give me permission."

"Consider yourself free," Vartan responded jokingly.

"All right. I shall. See that snow dome over there?"

They followed his arm to the stupendous snow peak, possibly the eighth or ninth mountain in the world, towering colossally up into the darkening blue of the evening sky.

"Well," Shane snapped, "I'm going to climb it. Start tomorrow morning at three. Be past the shoulder and onto that glacier at the left before the sun rises. Then one final lungbursting drag to the top."

"But," Vartan objected, "that is a major peak."

"I'm no amateur. Remember Chimborazo? We did it in our sleep, almost."

"The glaciers on Chimborazo were nothing like that brute," Vartan observed. "You can see from here that it is nothing but a Chinese puzzle of rotten crevasses."

"I've studied it through my glasses for three days. There's a bridle walk under the northern buttress clear to the bald snowfields on the top."

Vartan shook his head. Shane shrugged his shoulders, and turned away.

"You're in command," he said.

Vartan watched him receding down the slope to the camp in silence.

"Call him back," Marjorie whispered.

"Why?"

"He does so want to go."

"But what if he loses his life? I'm responsible, you know."

"He won't. Mr. Shane is impetuous in little things, but cautious in big. Can't you see he's broken hearted? Let him take two of our best mountaineers with him, and there will be no danger."

Vartan considered. It was obvious that Shane was bitterly disappointed; why, Vartan could not see.

"All right," he gave in. "I'll send our two best men with him. As a matter of fact, it isn't such a great risk after all. He is one of the best glacier men in the world. Oh, Shane!" he called.

Shane bounded up the slope like a young buck.

"Can I go?"

"Yes, if you take our two best mountaineers. I'll speak to Ali."

Shane all but embraced his leader. "You think I'm crazy, I know. But wait till you see what I bring down from there."

"What?" Marjorie exclaimed.

"Perhaps a pocketful of dirt?"

"You're out of your head," Vartan laughed. "Go ahead anyway, and have your bust. I wouldn't mind tackling it myself."

"Why not? Then you will go straight home after we come down. Your mad fossil chase ends, I tell you, on top of that mountain. Or rather, it both begins and ends there. My crazy theory against your preposterous hypothesis."

"I've half a mind to take you up," Vartan replied slowly.

"You begin to see I'm not as crazy as I seem?"

"No. You're worse. I'll come along to take care of you."

"Oh—," he began, and pulled up short. "Beg pardon, Marjorie. Our friend here takes his captaincy, or whatever it is, rather seriously. There's old Ali shouting to the cooks. Supper must be about ready. Let's go."

"May I change first?" Marjorie begged.

"Go ahead," Vartan agreed. "We'll hold the cooks twenty minutes.

She vanished, and the two men strolled down through the gloomy deodars to the cheerful glow of the campfire.

"These ghoulish trees make good fuel anyway," Shane remarked. "Is this to be a dress-up occasion of some sort?"

"Miss Driscott is tired of puttees, et cetera. I also would appreciate a real wash, a shave and a change into civilian clothes."

Shane dragged him off to put the wish into action. Twenty five minutes later they emerged from their tent, to find Marjorie

already revelling in the crackle and blaze of the huge log fire. She was immaculate in a white dinner dress as fresh as the afternoon it came from the modiste's.

"How did you do it?" they chorused.

"A woman knows instinctively how to do some things that a man will never learn," she replied with a charming air of superiority. She looked them over critically. Their hurried change to their decent clothes, carefully preserved on the march for possible official receptions by rulers of importance, had evidently pleased her. They grew quite self conscious under her cool, admiring gaze. Finally she deflated both of them at once.

"Your trousers need pressing," she remarked, turning her gaze to the tumbling flames. "Shall we go to dinner? Ali has just announced supper for the third time. I've been sitting here for ages."

It was the first carefree meal they had enjoyed together since leaving Srinagar. For an hour they relaxed, and any suspicions they may have had as to the sanity of their purpose, or of one another, for that matter, were blissfully forgotten. They had been thrown constantly together. The porters seemed to understand no English, and old Ali Baba was as reserved as a disgruntled tomcat. Twelve weeks of one another's undiluted company in the open is enough to drive almost any trio to homicide. But tonight all ragged nerves were soothed, and the three surrendered themselves to the luxuries of clean clothes, a friendly fire, and well cooked food.

Dinner over, they adjourned to Vartan's tent, opened up the flaps, and let the cheery warmth of the lively campfire stream in on them. Marjorie prepared to read the rest of Brassey's 'will' by the light of the fire.

"Hold on a minute," Vartan interrupted. "Hadn't you better turn in, Shane, and get some sleep if you are to start at three?"

Marjorie interceded. "It will take less than an hour to finish this. Can't he stay up till then?"

"Very well," Vartan agreed good naturedly. "Go ahead. I left off last time with Mr. Brassey's request that we read no further unless we were willing to commit ourselves unreservedly to his project. The last twelve weeks are sufficient proof that we are in this thing to the end."

"Mr. Brassey had just told how his poor father accused him on his deathbed of having betrayed both James and himself, while

Mr. Brassey—Charles—was in fact the only one of the three who had inherited the taint. The next goes on to say why the father's accusation was not only unjust but also unreasonable.

" 'On my father's death,' " she continued, reading from Brassey's manuscript, " 'I put aside all personal feelings, and surveyed the tragic history of the past five years, from James' departure for India to our father's death, in as dispassionate a spirit as I could command.

" 'Let me remind you that I had profited by a prolonged and sound scientific training, and that the rigid honesty of scientific research was not unknown to me, for I myself had carried out exacting investigations in biology. This invaluable training, and the critical turn of mind which had been acquired with it, I now directed upon the history of those five last years.

" 'Was my father right? Was I indeed the one tainted, and they the innocent victims? Self-examination, introspection on my motives during those five dark years, I discarded at once as possible means of vindication. No man can be a just judge of his own mind. What less fallacious methods remained?

" 'You will at once suggest the most obvious one, and that which ninety out of a hundred normal persons would pronounce conclusive. I submitted myself, during a period of six months, for constant observation and analysis, to four of the acknowledged experts of England on mental diseases. They subjected me, they declared, to every test known to medical science, and pronounced me sane beyond the suspicion of a doubt.' "

Marjorie interrupted her reading to add a personal observation. Whether she intended so or not, her remark had a curious effect on the two men. They felt as credulous folk may when they imagine their lives are being watched by enemies no longer living.

"James," she observed, "was taken ill quite suddenly. Up to the actual onset of the disease, he was perfectly sane, so far as any of his relatives or friends could see. From what Mr. Brassey has told me of other members of the family, it seems that the victims crack suddenly, with practically no warning of what is coming."

Neither listener made any reply, and she continued reading.

" 'My second test, which doubtless will seem of only slight value to the uninitiated, I regard as much more severe. As I have related, our family records have been preserved for many centuries. In particular, they are complete from the year 1100, when the

taint first crossed our blood. That amazingly intricate record, our fruitful family tree with its innumerable branches, would delight the eyes of any student of heredity. It fascinated mine for years, and continues to fascinate them. For, the names of all those who have inherited our curse and who have perished by it are marked on that prolific tree in red leaves, each the record of a blighted life.

" 'The distribution of those red names among the black early attracted the attention of our chroniclers. Long before—centuries before—Mendel discovered the basic laws of heredity, the keepers of our records had observed a fatal regularity in the pattern of our tree. By the middle of the eighteenth century they were able to predict with reasonable accuracy what proportion of the offspring from a particular union would leave their names in red on our family tree. Strange recurrences along particular branches were noted, such as two reds together, then four blacks, then a red, a black, a red, and six blacks. The clean generations were necessarily as rythmically spaced as the tainted, as also were the partly clean and partly tainted. By the early nineteenth century the hideous law was revealed in its entirety. It could be evaded only by the extinction of our race, branch, trunk and root. But instinct is stronger then reason, and we continue to flourish.

" 'Applying the empirical law to my father's brothers and sisters and to their children, I discovered that the inescapable toll had already been paid. Precisely one out of my father's immediate kin could expect, with a negligible probable error, to inherit the taint, and precisely one of all the children born to him, his brothers and sisters, could anticipate the same. His brothers and sisters were free beyond question. It was probable, then, that he was the predestined victim, doomed nearly nine hundred years before he was born.

" 'The further application seemed to be equally sound. If my father unjustly accused me in his own case, and at the same time in that of James, the probability that he was wrong in both instances was strengthened. James, I concluded, was the true sufferer in my own generation.

" 'The law, I acknowledge, is only as exact as any human mathematics. But each verification of it lessens its expectancy of error. By numerous checks on our history in the past eight hundred years, I reached the considered verdict that James and my father, not I, as they asserted, were the inheritors of our blight.' "

"Logic," Vartan remarked to the fire, as Marjorie turned the page, "is dangerous stuff in human affairs. Personally I prefer to take the opinion of the four insanity experts who examined Mr. Brassey."

"How do we know," Shane doubted, "that they ever examined him?"

"We have his word for it. Go on, Miss Driscott. Mr. Brassey has cleared himself. I want to hear what happened to James."

"I'm coming to it now. 'My poor brother communicated with us only once after his arrival in India. True to his bitter vow, he wrote to us on the day of his death. James knew that he was about to die in a manner which only the purest martyrs can face with fortitude and equanimity. To support the horror of my brother's death demands all of my own courage. Often the darkness of my bedroom is an unendurable torture, as I live with James his last hour in the light of day.

" 'Although he still believed that he had been betrayed, his affection for us and his inbred regard for the honor of Brassey House, prevailed in the hour of death. He remembered us in a way which he knew must make us remember him. The concluding sentences of his letter revealed his magnanimity in all its simple greatness, and showed that he had forgiven us all his imagined wrongs. This is what he wrote.

" ' "The large packet of seeds enclosed with this letter is my last gift to Brassey House. For the honor of our House, propagate these strains with the utmost care. They will sow the name of Brassey broadcast over the earth in flowers of perfect beauty." ' "

"*Delphinium Brassei?*" Shane asked.

"That, and a hundred others," Marjorie replied.

"What happened to the others?" Vartan inquired. "We saw only the delphinium."

"Yes," Shane seconded. "I never saw anything in the same class as the *Brassei* all the six months I worked at Brassey House."

"Perhaps I had better let Mr. Brassey tell it in his own way?" she suggested.

"Go ahead," said Vartan. "Hang it! There comes the rain." A sharp hiss from the fire announced the first enormous drop. Almost before Marjorie could scurry to her tent, the cold deluge descended and drowned the fire. In thirty seconds the camp was in

total darkness, and the cheerful fire nothing but a pile of charred logs.

"Your climb seems to be off," Vartan remarked, groping for his cot.

"Not necessarily. This is only one of the usual mountain showers. Bet you a dollar it's all cleared off in half an hour."

"Still want to try it?"

"Sure. I'll be out of here by three."

"In that case you can have my cot, and I'll stay up to see that you get off properly. The men going with you will have to get my orders first. Also you will all need breakfast. That means kicking the cook out of his blankets. You had better turn in now."

"Confound it!" Shane muttered from the end of the cot. "I wish I hadn't put on this shirt and these clothes. I'll have to change at an unholy hour in the morning. What are you going to do to pass the time?"

"Think about James Brassey. Do you make him out yet?"

"Not quite, poor devil. He was a lot gamer about the whole ghastly business than I would have been, cracked or sane. What's your guess?"

"The same as yours, I imagine. Well, I won't keep you awake talking. I'll call you about one thirty."

"Fine. I'm glad it rained, as I'll need some sleep before tackling—"

He was already asleep.

7

BLACK ICE

INSPECTOR RANSOME OF SCOTLAND YARD LOOKED more like a physician than a detective, well groomed, about fifty years of age, suave, and and inclined to be a trifle portly in his bearing. He and Charles Brassey were fixed friends of nearly thirty years' standing.

Originally destined for a business career, Ransome had quickly wearied of the monotonous grind of pounds, shillings and pence to which he was condemned as a very junior clerk in the Bank of England. A dishonest cashier gave Ransome his great opportunity, and he grasped it tenaciously. For some weeks shortly before young Ransome joined the staff at the Bank, the officials had been bothered by a slight, steady irregularity in one department which they were unable to trace. The pilfering continued, increasing gradually in volume as the thief became bolder with success, during Ransome's first six months at the Bank, and still the detectives failed to trap their man. The thefts affected the department in which young Ransome worked. After long deliberation the officials of the Bank, on the advice of Scotland Yard, took six of the junior clerks in the department into their confidence. Each was above suspicion. They were promised a substantial bonus for any information they might unearth leading to the detection of the thief. Ransome was one of the six. He got his man within three days. It was a brilliant piece of work, and it revealed Ransome's true talent. Within a week he was engaged at Scotland Yard as a prospective investigator. His two years'

apprenticeship satisfactorily worked out, he was taken on as a regular employee. Thereafter his rise was rapid.

When James Brassey disappeared in India in 1917, Charles and his father appealed to Scotland Yard in an endeavor to learn something of his life. From James' bitter silence they inferred that all was not going well with him, and that he was too proud to write home for help. Young Ransome, being a friend of Charles Brassey, and therefore not altogether ignorant of the family's affairs, was assigned to the investigation.

Ordinarily such a problem would be solved in a month at the most. It was nearly three years before the Indian police discovered a trace of James Brassey. They reported to Scotland Yard that James had severed all relations with white people and had 'gone native'. When last heard of he was wandering from one native settlement to another in the 'hills'—the Himalayas—practically begging his way as a mendicant holy man. For James, they reported, had seen the Light of Asia shortly after his arrival in India, and had adopted the Buddhist faith. Of itself this was no disgrace and nothing to tarnish the family name. Many Englishmen in India, particularly those whose lives are passed in the overwhelming solitudes of the mountains and forests, embrace the religion best adapted to the serene unity of nature. Possibly it was James' inherited and cultivated love of all growing things that prepared his eyes to see the light when it dawned.

Had James stopped at that point in his spiritual evolution, his father and brother would have had no complaint. If James preferred the poverty of a fakir to the decent comforts of a civilized Englishman, it was his own affair, and they would not meddle. From the India police they learned that James' bank account in Bombay had scarcely been touched since the day he deposited the very considerable sum with which he had left England. Money, therefore, was not his need.

But James did not remain content with his first clear revelation. For two years he disappeared completely. They inferred that he was wandering in inaccessible regions of the mountains, beyond reach of white communication, seeking greater holiness and peace in nature. Then, like a flash of lightning in the dark, came the almost unbearable news of his martyrdom. James, anything but a fanatic in his right mind, had sacrificed his life to his faith in a manner which, to his stricken father and brother, seemed need-

lessly hideous. The bulky package of tiny seeds or spores which James had enclosed in his letter almost broke their hearts. Had James been of a revengeful turn he could not have devised a more exquisite pain for those who had banished him.

James' letter was received in the spring of 1922. Mr. Brassey senior first showed signs of an unbalanced mind in the following autumn. During the six or seven months between the news of James' martyrdom and the onset of his own affliction, the older Brassey made no attempt to germinate any of the seeds which James had sent as his legacy to Brassey House. Almost exactly a year after the receipt of James' letter, the father died, and Charles Brassey abandoned his incipient scientific career to take charge of the business.

Not until nearly eight years after his father's death did Charles Brassey have the heart to open the package of seeds which James had bequeathed to the House. At last, on April 18, 1931, fourteen years to the day since James sailed for India, Charles broke the seal on the package of seeds. Thinking of his brother's tragic end, and wishing to perpetuate his memory in imperishable form, he had decided to attempt the germination of at least some of the seeds. Would they have retained their vitality after a lapse of eight years?

The seeds were almost inconceivably small. The dust of petunia or tobacco seed was coarse gravel in comparison with these. With the aid of a high powered lens, Charles observed at once that not one kind of seed was represented in the double handful of living dust but literally thousands. How had James, a mendicant holy man of the hills, contrived to amass this bewildering collection? And what species of plants were represented? Expert though he was, Brassey failed to recognize a single one of those tiny spores as the seed of any known plant. Provided they were still alive, those hundreds of thousands of seeds and their progeny might well cover the earth in two or three human generations. Were they alive? And, if so, were they of any value?

A month's delicate experimenting by the most skilful plant breeders in the Brassey experimental laboratories, proved conclusively that life still lingered in at least a fraction of all that uncountable multitude. They germinated with extraordinary slowness. The first plant that finally took root, however, grew with amazing, almost explosive speed. And when it bloomed, Charles

Brassey and every expert in the laboratories knew that a find of the very first magnitude had fallen into their hands. This would indeed spread the fame of Brassey House to the farthest garden of the tropics.

It was planned to keep this great discovery secret until all the seeds had been tested in a similar manner. Then, when the last had germinated, bloomed, and seeded, Brassey House would transform the art of gardening, the world over, by announcing the propagation and sale of thousands of new species of flowers, the humblest of them fit to queen it over the proudest flower on earth.

Such was the plan. A careless or too enthusiastic laboratory worker confided a hint of the great secret to a professional friend, and the mischief was done. A year after the first seed germinated, the underground campaign against Brassey House began. It opened with a series of petty thefts. Presently the thieves extended their operations. Charles Brassey confided in his friend John Ransome, now Inspector Ransome, of Scotland Yard.

All this was thirteen years in the past. Ransome had worked on the case incessantly, and had not caught a single spy. According to his own admission he was completely baffled. The lack of a sane motive behind the incessant spying was the most mysterious feature of the case. For Ransome refused to believe that any business competitor would persist in such methods to learn a rival's trade secrets or, granting that it was not impossible, the mystery of those expert spies remained. The ease with which they eluded his sharpest men showed that they were no common criminals, but highly trained operatives in some agency to which expense was immaterial. Was it probable, he asked, that a private business could afford a thirteen years' campaign of such magnitude?

The spies appeared in every department of the business, but never twice successively in the same department. In its turn each division of the great establishment had been affected. From porters and draymen to office girls and experts in the laboratories, all had contributed their spy or two who had got safely away. Ransome professed to be completely in the dark about the whole case, and Brassey had no reason to doubt his friend's word.

"Give me time," Ransome had said after each failure, "and I'll get my man."

Brassey could only accede. If Ransome failed, it was unlikely that anyone could succeed. Ransome had this trait in common with

the conservative physician whom he resembled outwardly: he never confided in his client—or patient—what were his real thoughts on the case in hand. Charles Brassey, by nature of a suspicious temperament, sometimes wondered whether his astute and sphynxlike friend was so completely in the dark as he professed to be.

The morning that Vartan's cablegram from Bombay came, Brassey hurried over with it to Scotland Yard. Ransome was alone at the time and at once received his friend. Brassey handed him Vartan's message. Ransome read it through carefully and handed it back.

"Well?"

"What am I to answer?"

"The truth, of course. Cable a plain 'No.' "

"But I don't understand what is behind Vartan's question."

Ransome paced the length of the room, and halted.

"You trust these two—Shane and Vartan?" he demanded, suddenly wheeling about to observe Brassey.

"If they are spies like the rest who have applied from time to time, it is as much your fault as mine, John," Brassey retorted with some heat. "You started things going from this end for the investigation of their records, and you assured me the American agency was absolutely trustworthy and competent."

"Easy, Charles," Ransome admonished with a smile. "I haven't said yet that I distrust them. In fact I place a great deal of confidence in Mr. Grimsby's report by itself. He told enough about the past of that young scamp, Shane, alone to queer the pair with any finnicky employer. But you're not that kind," he chuckled.

"Pah!" Brassey exclaimed. "What is a handful of wild oats when a young chap plays straight?"

"A handful of wild oats," Ransome replied with quiet significance. "We make a specialty of that kind of crop here. Now, what does Miss Driscott report? She has had time to size up Shane pretty sharply, and she should have formed a fair first estimate of Vartan by now. What does she cable?"

Brassey began pacing the floor, his hands behind his back, his head bent in furious thought.

"She trusts Shane," he admitted at last. "Her first impression of Vartan is about as unfavorable as it could be."

"That I regard as most significant," Ransome exclaimed.

"Why?"

Ransome deliberately avoided the issue. "You have never had reason to think Miss Driscott stupid in the six years she has been with you?"

Brassey almost lost his poise under the sudden imputation against his business acumen.

"Miss Driscott," he all but snapped, "has proven herself not only efficient but also singularly intelligent. Do you suppose I would have sent her out to India as observer if I had not tested her in a thousand exacting ways these past six years?"

"Of course not," Ransome soothed.

"Then what do you mean by insinuating that she isn't as clever as she might be?"

"Oh, nothing. I'm just that way—too much policing of third rate crooks. I see things that aren't there, perhaps. It struck me as rather peculiar that Miss Driscott should suspect Vartan and not Shane."

"Why?" Brassey demanded.

"These two men have been so closely associated in their South American explorations, that surely one would know by this time whether the other is or is not straight. A professional like myself would suspect both or neither of them. Miss Driscott, apparently, is more subtle, more psychological, as it were. I hope sex has nothing to do with her discriminations."

"She and Shane seemed to take a fancy to one another," Brassey recalled somewhat dubiously. "Still, if I know Miss Driscott, she isn't the sort to let an affair with a man obscure her judgment."

"I quite agree," Ransome seconded heartily. He studied his friend's face closely. "Something particular on your mind this morning?"

"That cable from Vartan gives me a vague feeling of danger."

"Let's see it again." Ransome's face betrayed no emotion whatever, not even indifference, as he read the message carefully through a second time. "There's nothing in this," he said. "Probably Vartan cabled at Shane's request before the party was about to lose touch with civilization. He naturally would be anxious."

"Of course," Brassey agreed. "How simple things are when one looks at them as they are, and not through a haze of suspicions.

But who can blame me, after what I've been through the last thirteen years? So you advise a straightforward answer?"

"Certainly. The truth, always. A plain 'No'. If there is anything deeper concealed under Vartan's inquiry, nothing will disconcert him so much as the truth. I make it a rule," he continued, "when handling expert crooks, to speak the direct truth. They never expect it, and they always think you are lying."

"Then you agree with Miss Driscott? You do suspect Vartan?"

"I do nothing of the kind. Until we get definite evidence, I suspend judgment. If he is straight, the truth is no more than is due him. If he is crooked, the truth may make him give himself away."

"Very well," Brassey assented halfheartedly. "I'll cable 'No'."

"Better do it at once," Ransome advised. "Miss Driscott may not be able to hold him much longer for observation unless he receives your answer."

The implied suspicion in Ransome's advice sent Brassey running for a cab. The moment he was out of the office, Ransome pressed a button. The call was answered by a prim young woman who might have been a private secretary.

"Miss Tappan," he exclaimed with an exultation which he rarely exhibited even to his most trusted aides, "We've got our man! Thirteen years! I knew we'd trap him sooner or later."

"Yes, Mr. Ransome?"

Her respectful answer, which just veiled an amused criticism of his enthusiasm, brought him back instantly to his reserved, colorless, professional manner.

"You will sail at once for Bombay to cooperate with Jamieson."

"I did not know that he is in India," Miss Tappan remarked.

"He left for Brindisi the afternoon Vartan and Shane signed up with Mr. Brassey, and caught the boat there."

"Then he must have reached Bombay two days ahead of Vartan and Shane."

"Three," Ransome corrected.

"Did he see Miss Driscott in Bombay?" Miss Tappan was not chattering; she was acquiring necessary professional information.

"Yes. I have his report. There is nothing of importance."

"And Miss Driscott is accompanying the expedition?"

"Jamison reported from Srinagar that she had started."

"No word of her since?"

"No. Presumably she is still with the party."

"The publicity from Darjiling will not be questioned?"

"It is working perfectly already, and the expedition hasn't started. They're swallowing it whole."

"To whom shall I report?"

"Mr. Brathwaite."

"At which office? Bombay or Srinagar?"

"Srinagar. I expect you will have a tedious wait. You had better take along something to keep you busy. Await my instructions there. I'll arrange for your passage. The boat train leaves at two. Here; I'll give you an order on Brathwaites' for expenses."

Miss Tappan pocketed her draft and slipped noiselessly from the room. She almost gave a hop, skip and jump as she hurried down the corridor to the women's dressing room to get her coat and hat. For at least a year, she joyfully anticipated, she could luxuriate as a lady of leisure in the garden of the world. Oh, the joy of it: not to be a despised and spying housemaid in households whose average intelligence was so far below her own as to be invisible, or to sit like a machine at the elbow of some embezzling magnate of the business world and take his stupid, betraying letters a halting sentence at a time.

For once in his carefully schooled life of self-repression as an investigator of crime, Inspector Ransome let himself go the moment Miss Tappan was out of his office.

"I've got my man," he exclaimed, pacing rapidly back and forth the full length of the room. "Got him. After nearly thirteen years. Vartan! But I must be more careful than ever of poor old Charles, or he'll spoil it all yet. I've got to protect him from himself. There's no escape this time. Trapped like a rat in those infernal mountains. Only one way in and one way out—unless the expedition crosses China, or comes out somewhere in Siberia. But it can't. My instructions to Brathwaites' have made that impossible. Vartan either comes back the way he went in, or he starves to death. I've got my man, after all these years."

He stopped suddenly, somewhat dashed in his enthusiasm.

"Miss Tappan didn't seem to think much of my performance. And she's been on the case nearly six years. She ought to know. After all, am I thickheaded?"

He paced the room, trying to evaluate himself objectively.

"No," he decided, "I'm not. If Jamieson, the top man in the

India Secret Service, couldn't crack this nut in all the years he's been on it, I don't see that I'm slow. Now we shall see what Jamieson does with his chance to prove himself the best man of the Indian service. I've made good. Will he? Or is it to be another last minute escape?"

Unaware that Scotland Yard had an intense interest in his conduct of the expedition from the day it left Srinagar, Vartan had followed his own lead. Had he been told that the renowned Inspector Ransome considered him as 'his man', his emotions would undoubtedly have interfered with the efficient command of the expedition on the first twelve weeks of its march from Srinagar. And if he had known, as he sat listening to Marjorie reading the second instalment of Charles Brassey's confession, that another young woman, a Miss Tappan, was at that moment idling away the evening with a novel in front of the blazing log fire at the lounge of an inn at Srinagar, patiently waiting his return to the Vale of Cashmere, he would have braved the downpour which sent Marjorie to bed, and ordered the taciturn, cat-faced old Ali Baba to break camp and be on his way at once. Vartan hated to keep a lady waiting, even when he didn't like her.

The morning that Shane ventured forth, shivering, with the two most skilful mountaineers of the party into the icy starlight, proved to be the turning point in the history of the expedition. It put a vital decision squarely up to Marjorie, and she met it unflinchingly. Had she faltered when the crisis arose, the mysteries of James Brassey's voluntary martyrdom and of his younger brother's persecution by spies for nearly thirteen years, most probably would have remained unsolved.

Half frozen in his vigil, Vartan had no difficulty in keeping awake and getting Shane out of bed at one thirty. Everything proceeded according to schedule till three o'clock, when Shane and his two companions left the camp for their dangerous climb.

"Take no chances," was Vartan's parting injunction. "I've tested the ropes. Don't try any stunts. Rope yourselves the moment you begin the real climbing."

"Right-o, Captain. See you tonight some time. Don't stew if we're not back till this time tomorrow."

"I'll give you twenty four hours. Good luck!"

"Thanks. Especially for the leave."

Their crackling footsteps gradually became indistinct as the three strode rapidly away over the frozen ground, and Vartan turned back to the camp to go to bed. Old Ali Baba, who had insisted on superintending the breakfasting and provisioning of the three adventurers, loomed up in the dim starlight.

"What is it, Ali?"

"Fools," the old chap sputtered disgustedly, jerking his thumb toward the floating mass of the mountain, where it swam like a dream against the blazing blue-black background of stars and sheer space.

"I agree," Vartan laughed. "We're nearly frozen here. What will it be like on the glacier away up there? Hullo; what have you there?"

"Soup. Eat."

"I'll do that. Ali, you're worth your weight in pigeon-blood rubies."

He took the bowl of steaming soup and glanced up at the kind old face of the man offering it. In the dim starlight Ali's grizzled, bewhiskered countenance looked exactly like that of a battle-scarred old tomcat intercepted on one of his prowls by night. Vartan almost laughed in the old man's face. The warm bowl in his half frozen hands restrained his mirth, and he bade Ali a grateful goodnight.

The three climbers were heard of sooner than Shane had promised. As the expedition could not proceed until the adventurers returned, Vartan, Marjorie, Ali and his remaining porters loafed about the camp all morning, revelling in the warm sunshine, and enjoying to its last lazy indulgence the first real rest they had taken in twelve weeks. Shortly after three o'clock Vartan was startled by stumbling footsteps hurrying down the rocky slope on which he lay dozing in the sun. Scrambling to his feet, he saw one of the mountaineers who had accompanied Shane, reeling toward him. The man was at the point of exhaustion. Before he could pantomime his message—he spoke only a word or two or English—Vartan was on his way down to the camp, shouting orders as he ran.

Ali translated the messenger's incoherent account of what had happened. Ali's own English was barely adequate to the emergency, but Vartan understood. In ten minutes he and five of the

porters were on their way up the first long slope leading to the glacier.

"Wait!" Ali shouted after him.

Vartan gestured to the porters, indicating the route to be followed, and hurried back.

"What is it?"

Ali pointed to the exhausted messenger who was doing his utmost to force someone to take charge of an untidy bundle in his hand. Vartan took the object. On unwrapping the rags in which the messenger had carried it—rags torn from his own clothing, Vartan came upon an inner wrapping which he recognized as flannel from Shane's outer shirt. A large lump of ice, black as jet, slipped out.

Marjorie, breathless, ran up just as the ice was revealed.

"From Shane," Vartan said. "I don't know what it means. Keep it in a can till we get back."

"Is he hurt?" she asked, going white.

"Yes."

She looked at the lump of black ice in her hands, and hesitated before asking her next question.

"Badly?"

"Apparently. We'll bring him down. Have his bed warm, and plenty of hot water. I'm taking stimulants with me."

Again she weighed the lump of ice in her hands.

"He is not dead?"

"Not if this man isn't too upset to know the facts."

"Let me go with you. Ali will see that the necessary things are done here."

"No. It will be a terrific climb, as we must get to him before sunset and bring him down in the dark."

"But I love him," she said.

For a second he hesitated.

"No. Do as I have told you. It will take all of my strength, and I'm an experienced mountaineer. I'll tell him what you said. It will give him heart for the journey down."

Without a word she walked away toward the camp, staring at the lump of black ice in her hands.

8

BARREN FLOWERS

MARJORIE'S FICTION HAD COME DOUBLY TRUE. The entertaining story which she jokingly told Shane and Vartan as part of her publicity campaign, had suddenly materialized into sombre fact. Shane was carried into camp at three o'clock on the day following the accident. He was barely conscious. In addition to a slight concussion of the brain, both of his ankles were broken.

Vartan had learned but little from the one porter who stayed on the glacier, and the other was either too exhausted or too frightened to explain clearly to Ali Baba what had happened. Only when Vartan returned, did Ali succeed in piecing together the facts from the first porter's account.

Shane and his two companions had reached the glacier safely after a stiff but safe climb. They made their way cautiously up the ice until within half a mile of the summit. The surface of the glacier was fissured in all directions by deep crevasses. These however presented no difficulty to the three, as all were expert climbers, familiar with ice. The porters assumed that Shane would head directly up the glacier until in the shadow of the true crest of the mountains. They were surprised therefore when he ordered a halt at the edge of a particularly ugly crevasse, and signified that the party was to unrope itself.

The porters of course obeyed. Shane then tied all the ropes together and secured one free end under his armpits and around his body. Although they considered Shane's next order both foolhardy

and silly, the porters obeyed and lowered him slowly down into the crevasse. It was about eighty feet deep. Shane seemed anxious to reach the oldest ice, packed under the tremendous pressure of the main glacial mass, at the very bottom of the crevasse. About seventy feet down from the lip, the ice bulged sharply out, forming a narrow ledge on which a man might stand with safety. The porters thought this ledge was Shane's objective, and stopped paying out the rope when he reached it. Signalling them to let him down over the ledge, he disappeared from view. Presently the rope slackened, and they knew that he had reached his stopping place.

Ten or fifteen minutes passed with no signal from Shane. Then the rope was jerked sharply, and they started to haul in. They at once noticed that Shane's weight seemed to have increased. As he cleared the ledge on his ascent, they saw the cause. Shane was clasping in his arms a huge chunk of what looked like black glass. They learned later that this was the tip of an old serac which had been weathered out on the sloping sides of the crevasse at a depth of about eighty five feet. It was but one of several hundred blunt cones of jet black ice, evidently of higher melting point than the rest, which had survived, like the papillae of a cat's tongue, on the slowly melting walls of the crevasse.

The increased weight had caused the rope to saw viciously into the sharp projecting edge. Shane noticed the danger when it was too late. He was already twenty feet above the ledge when he realized that the frayed stretch of rope above him must snap before he could reach the top. Dropping his black ice, he tugged frantically at the rope. One porter interperted the signal as an order to haul in faster; the other as a command to be lowered to the ledge before the rope broke. The second porter slackened his hold to let Shane down; the first, not expecting the sudden tension, let the rope slip through his hands. Both now saw what was about to happen, and simultaneously hung back on the rope with all their weight, to prevent Shane being dashed down on the ledge. Under the sudden strain the frayed rope parted, and Shane's body, ricochetting against the sharp edge, plunged into the depths of the crevasse.

The porters made an immediate attempt at rescue. Uncoiling their reserve ropes, they spliced them onto the broken length, and one lowered the other over the lip. He found Shane conscious but incoherent. Shane seemed to feel that he was done, and by frantic

pantomime urged his would-be rescuer to salvage a lump of the black ice and take it down to camp. To pacify Shane, the man stuffed a chunk of the shattered ice into his shirt. Then he gave the signal to haul up. Shane reached the surface in safety, and the porter, chancing the worn rope, was then pulled out.

Shane was now apparently out of his head. He did succeed however in making the men understand the importance of the black ice. Tearing a strip from his shirt, and signifying the porter who held the ice to do likewise, he signed for them to wrap the ice in the rags, return to camp, and leave him. This of course they would not do, and they compromised by one staying with the injured man and the other going for help. They alone could not have carried him down the mountain. The man who stayed with Shane was half frozen when Vartan found him, as he had stripped his outer clothes in order to wrap Shane. Vartan blessed Brathwaites' for good judgment in selecting porters.

The long climb down was accomplished slowly but in safety. Shane did not seem to comprehend what was going on, and Vartan concentrated on getting him as quickly as possible to camp, leaving explanations to the future.

Everything was ready at the camp when the rescue party appeared, thanks to Marjorie's silent, thoughtful efficiency and Ali Baba's foresight. Just before he went to sleep, Shane's mind cleared and he recognized Marjorie.

"Too bad you didn't bring the radio," he grinned. "I've done my stunt."

"Don't," she begged.

"Only joking. Silly fool to get caught like that. Hullo, Vartan. Am I out of it?"

"We'll see when you wake up. Go to sleep."

"Get my ice?"

"It's safe. Go to sleep."

Vartan went in search of Ali Baba, and Marjorie followed slowly, thinking desperately. Presently she quickened her steps and caught up with him.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"Get Ali to pick his eight best men and a first rate leader and send them back to Srinagar with Shane. Taking it in spells, two or at most four, can carry the litter. The other four will hump supplies and take care of the pack ponies. Two animals will be

enough. They should make it in about thirty days; the general grade is all downhill, and they can do a march and a half a day."

"But will the porters know enough to attend to the splints and bandages?"

"Probably not any too much. He must look out for that part himself. Unless," he added suggestively, "you go with him?"

"I have been thinking of it," she confessed.

"Well?"

"Give me till the last moment to decide."

"Certainly. It is your affair."

Early the next morning everything was ready for Shane's journey back to Srinagar. Ali Baba assured Vartan that the eight picked men were the cream of the forty, and that their leader could be trusted to the limit. He had indeed been in charge of pack trains on minor expeditions. The painful business of setting Shane's broken ankles as best they could was mercifully over.

Shane bore his misfortune without complaint, except at what he called his own stupidity in courting an avoidable accident. Over confidence, he ruefully admitted, had exacted its usual tax. Before the sad little party started, Shane expressed a desire to speak privately with Vartan. Marjorie withdrew.

"Mere business," Shane called after her. "Life insurance, and all that."

"You are not going to die," she exclaimed, going white. "If there were the slightest danger, I—"

"What?" Vartan encouraged, leading her away a short distance, out of earshot of Shane.

"I would disobey Mr. Brassey's order and go back with Mr. Shane."

"Can't you do that anyway? You saw the other day that my map is better than yours. Why not go along with him?"

"I can't," she asserted in a low tone, "unless it is a matter of life and death. But it isn't, is it?"

"No," he replied, lowering his voice. "Shane is badly hurt, of course, and he is out of the expedition for good. But there's not the slightest danger of him dying."

"Then I must go with you," she decided.

"Why?" he asked curiously.

"Because Mr. Brassey ordered me to accompany the expedition as observer. To disobey means disgrace, and the end of my pro-

fessional career. He could never give me a recommendation to another position."

"You still suspect me?"

"Don't ask that," she begged. "Can't you see that there may be danger from these porters? How do you know that one of them isn't a clever spy? Or that we shall not meet spies later?"

"I hadn't thought of those possibilities," he admitted drily. "Brassey said we should be followed. Doubtless he thought of the same things," he continued searching her face for the truth. "You would throw your future to the winds, and go back to Srinagar with Shane, if you knew he was dangerously ill?"

She seemed to resent the implied doubt in his question.

"I would," she asserted firmly, "without a second thought of myself, my future, or anything but him. As he is not in danger," she concluded with a flash of defiance, "I shall obey Mr. Brassey's orders, and see that you are not robbed. That is," she added maliciously, "if you ever find what you are looking for."

She walked stiffly away, and Vartan rejoined Shane. The latter lost no time in delivering his farewell message.

"I'm leaving that lump of black ice—it's water by now—with you, because it might get lost on a wild trip like this, with me on my back and unable to boss things. Don't lose it. Dry out the black powder and carry it in a bottle where thieves won't think of looking for it."

"Your head feels a little queer still?" Vartan suggested.

"Queer, nothing! I'm not raving. When your preposterous hypothesis about the origin of those fossil beds blows up, I'll tell you how they really happened. And when our friend Brassey finds that his shovelful of dirt is no good for growing prize delphiniums, or anything else, I'll tell him why."

"All right, old man," Vartan laughed. "I'll carry that bottleful of black dust next to my heart till we meet again. Take good care of yourself. So long!"

The little party moved briskly off, back over the hardwon trail, and Vartan ordered Ali to get the pack train started.

"Oh, by the way," he added as an afterthought, "send one of the men to me with that bottle of black water. The ice, you know, that Mr. Shane sent down from the glacier."

Vartan had almost forgotten it in the first five minutes after Shane's departure, so little importance did he attach to his friend's

request. It was probably but the vagary of a man still not quite in his right mind. Old Ali hurried off to execute his orders. In ten minutes he was back, empty handed.

"Gone," he announced, with an expressive gesture.

"The devil you say. Have you looked everywhere? Carefully?"

"Everywhere. Twice. The bottle I found. But no water."

"All right," said Vartan. "Never mind. Some careless kitchen hand probably threw it out, thinking it was just dirty water. It doesn't matter. Get the men off; we must do a double march today to make up some of our lost time."

"Brassey and Miss Driscott seem to be right after all," Vartan mused as he strolled up the trail. "If that black ice of Shane's really was of any value. That's the question. Was it? And if so who of our party would know enough to steal it? I had better tell Miss Driscott." She also had not waited for the pack train, and was sauntering ahead of Vartan. "Oh, Miss Driscott," he called. She turned and waited for him.

"What is it, Mr. Vartan?" she asked when he overtook her. He briefly explained.

"I don't like this," she said. "It begins to look serious."

"You mean we are harboring a spy?"

"It looks that way, whether Mr. Shane's black ice is or is not of any value. A spy naturally would attempt to steal any specimens collected by either you or Mr. Shane. Can't you see?"

"I begin to," he admitted uneasily. "You say you are Brassey's observer. Presumably you have been keeping your eyes open. Suspect anyone?"

She scanned his face long and doubtfully before confiding her suspicions.

"You will only laugh when I tell you."

"No I shan't, Miss Driscott. This is important. Whom do you suspect?"

"The headman."

"Ali Baba?" Vartan questioned incredulously. Then he burst into a roar of laughter. Marjorie reddened and walked off in a huff. "Excuse me," he begged, overtaking her "but I really couldn't help it. Poor old Ali is such a guileless soul. He's just like a tough old gray tomcat that's been battered about all his life, only to find one human being in his declining years in whom he can trust. I'm his find; he's taken a strong fancy to me, and I wouldn't

disillusionize the poor old chap for anything. Honestly, Miss Driscott," he continued seriously, "you must be joking."

"I am not," she asserted firmly.

"No?" he queried with a bewildered frown. "Then if you were in my place, what would you do?"

"Order him back at once to Srinagar. You have a good excuse. Mr. Shane, you can say, needs the best possible attention."

Vartan walked on in silence for several minutes.

"This is your honest opinion?" She nodded gravely. "Why do you suspect Ali rather than one of the porters?"

"Because he is the most intelligent of all the natives. I think it is a safe rule," she said slowly, "to distrust superior intelligence in one's supposed inferiors. However, you, not I, are in command of the expedition. I merely gave advice when I was asked. You must make the decision."

"Quite right. Thanks for the advice, even if I am not going to take it."

"You will keep this man?"

"Yes. I'll bank on it that Ali is exactly what he professes to be—a highly competent headman. And let me say, Miss Driscott," he continued gravely, "that I fully understand your own case. Six years of the poisoned atmosphere of Brassey House have made you unduly suspicious of your fellow human beings. Confess, now: you still distrust me? Own up; you do, don't you?"

"I don't know," she faltered in a voice that was barely audible. "Sometimes I believe I know you, and the next moment you are as much of a mystery as ever."

"But," Vartan protested, "I'm no neurotic. And besides, incomprehensibility is a woman's prerogative."

"Do you understand me?" she smiled.

"Perfectly," he answered coolly. "As I said, too much suspicion has made you distrustful without cause."

"Like poor Mr. Brassey," she sighed. She walked on in silence for some moments, and then faced him abruptly.

"Could we sit here and talk for an hour, and catch up with the pack train by nightfall?"

"Easily," he replied, wondering.

"Then let us sit here," she said, "where all the sunlight of the world billows down over those lower ranges, and where we

can see the level horizon, ages away in the distance, like a faint silver thread across infinity."

"I'm willing," he agreed, still puzzled.

"Look at the sky," she continued calmly. "Is it more to you than a vastness of blue, that you look at every day and never see?"

"If you mean—" he began, but she did not let him finish.

"Would you miss it if your eyes were burned out? Men have done such things to their own kind. And some have done it to themselves in the name of holiness." She extracted Charles Brassey's confession from the botanical collector's case which she habitually carried. "Do you remember that horrible fakir in the gutter at Bombay? Yes? So do I. He was not blind. You and I can still see. To go blind is one tragedy to a man who has loved the sky, and who has seen the mountains and all their flowers. To lose forever the surge of the wind in the forests is another. And still another is to forego forever the sharp, clean smell of burning wood, or of smouldering leaves. To know in one awful last second that the sky, the mountains, the wind and the myriads of flashing, living colors, vivid as they never were in all of conscious life, are to be annihilated though life itself persists, is worse than death."

"You refer to James Brassey?"

"Yes. I chose this place for you to hear the story of his martyrdom, so that you can see and hear the things that James loved and cast aside because he imagined he had seen the only light of the world. What did he see when the sky went out and he no longer felt the wind on his cheek? Was his sacrifice rewarded? I think not," she concluded with a bitter laugh. "The wages of folly is death."

"James may not have thought it folly," he objected. "And he may have found the true life after all."

"He did not! Listen to this, if you feel inclined to go behind your verdict on that fakir we saw in Bombay. I admired and respected you that day. Please don't spoil it all now." She turned the leaves of the manuscript till she found what she wanted. "I shall omit a considerable part of what Mr. Brassey has written here, as it tells only of long experiments with the seeds which James had sent home, and of the beginning of the persecution by spies. There is just one significant detail," she said, glancing up, "and I wish you to remember this particularly, Every one of all those celestial

flowers—please do not smile, they were so beautiful that no meaner description is worthy of them—all of those celestial flowers that bloomed from James Brassey's all but microscopic seeds were *barren.*"

Vartan sat up suddenly, startled.

"You mean to say," he demanded, "that the flowers never seeded?"

"Not one." Her blue eyes grew luminous with sheer intelligence as she scanned his face. "Are you surprised?"

"Surprised is not the right word. I'm shocked."

"I thought you would be," she said with a low, musical laugh. "While I was waiting for you and Mr. Shane in Bombay, Mr. Brassey cabled all about your 'sealed orders', although he disbelieved what you seemed to hint they might be. And he told me how happy he was in having met at last a man as mad as himself."

"Yes, I remember," Vartan admitted. "But how on earth can you possibly know that what you have just told me proves that I'm off the right track?"

"You are aiming for your own project." she countered.

"I am. But you must believe me, Miss Driscott, that until a moment ago, I was convinced that the solution of my own problem would give me the answer to Brassey's as a mere corollary."

"It would tell you the origin of that delphinium?"

"If it were right. Presumably the delphinium is barren like all the rest of the plants that Brassey has grown from James' seeds?"

"Undoubtedly. And, Mr. Vartan, it is the last. There are no seeds left. Not all germinated, of course. Only about a tenth of them produced healthy plants."

"I begin to see daylight. The reason for this expedition is not so crazy as I thought it was."

"Are you sure?" she questioned. "You have yet to learn Mr. Brassey's motive. But your theory—if you had one—is destroyed by the barrenness of those flowers?"

"Destroyed? It is abolished. At least so far as Brassey's end of it is concerned. I still have faith in my own application. By the way," he added reflectively, "Shane has maintained from the beginning that he alone has the right clue."

She smiled mysteriously. "We shall see. Now, shall I read?"

He nodded, and she began.

" 'You who read this will understand why I, Charles Brassey,

cannot endure the darkness. Never since the day that I read my poor brother's letter have I slept in an unlighted room. You will recall that I have already told you that the darkness of my bedroom is a torture not to be endured. I have slept in darkness only when the tiny night light has died while I slept, and I have wakened in an agony of prayer that my dear brother indeed is dead.

" 'Not content with the more usual acerbations of his cruel faith, James took the last, irretrievable step on the harsh road to holiness. In the full flower of his manhood, in complete possession of his bodily faculties, although his mind, I am convinced, had broken irremediably before he left England—in the pride of his life, I say, James condemned himself to a living death.

" 'Do you who read this know, as I have learned to know, the meaning of the word 'immured', as fanatics use it?

" 'Immured.

" 'It means to be walled in; to be shut up for the term of one's natural life in total darkness, in a cell whose walls are so thick that no sound can penetrate them.

" 'It means a lingering death in life of perhaps fifty years.

" 'It means the gradual decay of the optic nerves, as the eyes rebel at the perpetual darkness, so that the living-dead no longer has the capacity to feel the light on his whitened eyeballs, should war or earthquake set him free from his hideous martyrdom.

" 'Immured.

" 'It means that a man shall lose all sense of time. He will not know when the rice and water are thrust into his black cell at the long, narrow hole near the base of the four foot wall. No light, not even the visibility of darkness, can enter by that narrow channel, four feet long.

" 'Immured.

" 'It means the intolerable accumulation, through perhaps fifty years, in a cell, without light or sound, of the waste products of the body, and the abnegation of our human, pitiful attempts to be as clean as the animals who rove free and unafraid, in the sun, under the open blue of heaven. To be lower than the lowest brute; that is what it means, in the name of selfish holiness.

" 'It means the slow atrophy of the nerves, of the skin, and of the brain which animated them, so that no longer can the dying shell feel heat or cold, or sense the rhythm of summer and autumn, winter and spring.

" 'It means that on one last morning, in the full glory of the sun, with the breeze on his cheek, a man shall enter his tomb. Facing the light, as the masons wall up the entrance, he shall see the last slit vanish, and find himself alone, forever, in total darkness and in absolute silence.

" 'Silence. For though he repents of his folly, no man will ever know of his repentence. The outside world is dead to him; he is dead to the outside world. The wails of the damned could scarce be heard through those walls. Only when the rice and water no longer are removed from the bowls, thrust into the black hole on spatulas, do the holy acolytes of the holiest men surmise that he is at last lost in the true Nirvana.

" 'They are not hasty. The holy man may be too weak to reach his rice and water. On the fourteenth day, provided he is still too feeble from sickness to eat or drink, he will die. The masons again will approach the door, this time to undo their work.

" 'And, it may be, a younger crew of stone workers will break down the entrance to the holy tomb. They may be the sons, or even the grandsons, of those who walled up the entrance. For it is known that one holy man lived in his lightless tomb for seventy five years. He had entered it on his twenty sixth birthday. James was thirty three; he may live the full century—sixty seven years of it, in hell.

" 'They will say he has attained Nirvana. Then they will cast his withered, foul husk of a body to the jackals.

" 'James loved flowers, the wind, mountains, the noonday skies and the last, sea-green light of the lingering day. So, I have no doubt, has every martyr who has given his eyes to the fiendish faith which claimed my brother. Did my brother recover his sanity in the silent darkness of his tomb? Was his refusal of the food and water voluntary—if indeed he has refused them by now?

" 'Immured.

" 'To become suddenly sane, and to realize that one's mad fanaticism was all a bitter jest and a black blasphemy against nature; to beat upon the walls, and no one hear; to shout, and receive no answer; to curse God and live; to reject the rice and water until weakness enthralls the body and makes the desire to repent a second time, and live, futile; to die in silence, this is the meaning of 'immured'.

"'Therefore I shall immortalize the living vision of James Brassey as no man's dead vision has been immortalized. I will sow his name in beauty over the earth.

"'I trust that he is dead.'"

She restored the manuscript to her case. Without a word, Vartan rose and followed her, to overtake the caravan.

9

BUTTERFLIES AND BEETLES

SIX WEEKS TO THE DAY AFTER HE HAD BADE Vartan goodbye, Shane was carried into Srinagar. The party had not made nearly such good time as Ali Baba and Vartan had confidently predicted, and for this lag Shane himself was to blame.

Three days after starting back, Shane found that his broken ankles caused him hardly any pain if he loosened the bandages slightly. Taking advantage of his discovery, he decided to prolong the return to civilization and make his forced retreat as profitable as possible. Over the mutinous protests of the headman in charge of the bearers, Shane ordered four of them off on a side trip, to climb an all but inaccessible peak and bring back samples of the snow and ice from its summit. This maneuver was repeated half a dozen times at irregular intervals, until Shane had a small collection of samples in bottles and old cans, and the party was behind its schedule with no hope of retrieving the squandered time.

On being carried into the inn, Shane's first act was to write out a cable to Brassey, briefly stating the facts and asking for instructions. His next was to go to bed and send for a doctor. Having safely delivered their invalid, the headman and his eight porters marched off unconcernedly to report themselves at Brathwaites'.

The arrival of a lonely white man on a litter naturally caused a buzz of speculation among the idling tourists at the inn. Who was

this pale, interesting looking man, what had he been doing, and where had he been doing it? The clerk could only tell them that the invalid's name was Shane, that he was an American, and that he had probably fallen down a mountain side while sight-seeing with his party of friends. The less venturesome tourists shuddered and walked thoughtfully away. Finally only one lingered, little Miss Tappan, who had become quite friendly with the manager during her stay of over seven weeks at the inn.

"Do you suppose he's really badly hurt?" she asked.

"Seems to be, Miss Tappan. We'll know more when the doctor comes. Ah, here he is now. You can go right up, Doctor Wemyss. The patient is in the large front room—number 20."

While Shane was submitting to what Dr. Wemyss considered necessary, Miss Tappan quietly slipped out to the telegraph and cable office. Her innocently worded little message was not addressed to Scotland Yard, nor to Inspector Ransome, but to a confidential address and a fictitious name which were details, but highly important ones, of the code between Ransome and herself. Within two hours of Shane's arrival in Srinagar, Ransome was informed of the fact twice, first by Miss Tappan's cable, and then by telephone message from Charles Brassey.

"Better come over at once, Charles," he replied.

In the brief interview which followed in Ransome's private office, the inspector did not consider it necessary to inform Brassey that the news was old. Brassey however noted his friend's preoccupation and commented on it.

"You seem worried, John. I hope I'm not intruding on more important business with this pestiferous affair of my own?"

"Not at all," Ransome hastened to reassure him. At the moment he was devising his reply to Miss Tappan's rather frantic appeal for help. "Well, Charles, what do you make of it?"

"Simply this, John. Vartan has sent Shane back without any legitimate excuse."

"Two broken ankles not a fair reason for abandoning a mountain climb?" Ransome questioned, raising his brows. "Pretty strong, that, Charles."

"If he was well enough to be carried back in a journey that took six weeks, he was well enough to be carried forward the same way. Broken bones don't turn men back when they want to go on. Why, there was Parmalee, on our 1920 expedition to Tibet, who

was helpless on his back for six months with a fractured thigh. Yet he carried on and directed the men from his litter."

"In short, Charles, you are beginning to suspect Vartan? Shane was sent back on the first pretext, so that Vartan can go on alone and get all the kudos?"

"It is not impossible."

"But we agreed that Vartan's record assayed a hundred per cent pure gold. Again, what of Miss Driscott?"

"Yes," Brassey muttered uneasily. "What of her?"

"Can't she take care of herself?"

"Don't torture me, John, Oh, why did I send her off with no protection on this terrible journey? But she begged to go."

"She'll be all right," Ransome asserted with conviction. "And she will see that Vartan keeps his contract."

"I trust she will, for her own sake as much as mine."

"Look here, Charles, you're only borrowing trouble. I'll cable to Brathwaites' and find out the exact nature of Shane's injuries. If the doctor in charge agrees that Shane did the only sensible thing in returning to Srinagar, your suspicions are proved groundless. Go back to your office and I'll telephone when the answer comes."

Instead of cabling to Brathwaites', Ransome coded a message to Miss Tappan which read: "Use your brains and keep out of his way. Report progress."

The unforeseen turn of events had not even jarred Inspector Ransome's rock-ribbed conviction that he had 'got his man'. It merely put a new angle on one drive of his general campaign. Confident that Miss Tappan would rise to the crisis and turn it to their mutual advantage, Ransome coolly went on with his routine work. When a sufficient interval had elapsed, he called Brassey on the telephone.

"I have just heard from Brathwaites'. The physician in charge says that Shane could not possibly have continued with the expedition without incurring a strong risk of being crippled for life. The bones will have to be reset as it is."

"Thank God!" Brassey ejaculated at the other end of the wire.

"Eh? What was that? Shake up your instrument."

"I was just saying how thankful I am. Miss Driscott, I feel now, is in no danger."

"Of course not," Ransome asserted. "Vartan's record is pure

gold, as I have always said. What will you cable to Shane?"

"Regrets, of course. I'll arrange with Brathwaites' to have him properly taken care of till he can come home. I suppose he is out of the expedition for good now?"

"Oh, undoubtedly. It will be months before he can walk again."

As he hung up the receiver, Ransome smiled. "Charles is too suspicious for his own good, and not suspicious enough by half for mine. If Shane goes tramping in the Himalayas next week, I'll have to explain that the doctor's first diagnosis was contradicted by the X-ray, and that poor Shane's ankles didn't have to be broken again."

The truth lay between Ransome's extremes. One bone had to be reset, and Shane would probably spend at least a week in bed before being released to the comparative freedom of a wheel chair. All this Miss Tappan learned without the slightest exertion of her professional talents. These she reserved for the chambermaid, the nurse, and Dr. Wemyss. From the last she learned to her satisfaction that Shane had begged the doctor to lend him his microscope, 'to kill this deadly week ahead of me'. The doctor kindly offered to send him the best microscope in Srinagar, the property of a colleague whose mania was diatoms. Shane blessed him, and Miss Tappan blessed them both. She knew that she could learn almost as much as Shane himself, by using the eyes of the nurse and the chambermaid. The enthusiast with a microscope always insists on making the nearest bystander peer through the lenses at his latest find. The week that had threatened to be so tedious passed quite pleasantly.

While Shane was sharing the excitements of microscopical exploration with his nurse—and incidently but unconsciously with Miss Tappan—Marjorie and Vartan made a number of discoveries of the deepest significance.

First there was Vartan's disturbing discovery that, given a free and honorable field, he might easily fall in love with Marjorie Driscott. When he began to suspect that she was not entirely indifferent to him, he pulled up as short as if he had just been about to step over a precipice. Quick to sense his change in manner, and respecting him for the reason of it, which she guessed, she instantly responded in kind. They had been practically alone together for nearly five weeks, as the discrete and taciturn Ali

Baba made himself as inconspicuous on the march as the humblest porter. Whether or not Marjorie had intended by her revelation of her true character, when she read the last of Brassey's confession, to arouse Vartan's interest, she had, and the mischief was done. She, no less than he, realized that their hour together under the sky, with only the winds and the mountains as witnesses, must be forgotten. With something like relief, they resumed the formal relationship they had had before Shane's accident. There remained however at least the afterglow of a warmer understanding, which made their companionship more human.

Their second discovery was less pleasant. Three weeks after Shane left the party, old Ali reported that the pack ponies were showing signs of distress. High altitude—they were trudging through snowfields in a desolate plateau of about fourteen thousand feet elevation at the time—did not account for the sickness of the heavily laden beasts. Vartan at first was disposed to blame the pack saddles and faulty loading, until Ali pointed out that the distressing sores were not confined to the ponies' backs. Indeed their legs seemed to be affected the worst. The disease—if it could be called such—manifested itself in boils and what looked like burns, painful to the touch, and apparently slow in healing. The absolutely pure, rarefied air should have hastened the disinfection of any ordinary wound; these seemed to be a of different kind. There was nothing to be done but to ease the animals as far as possible by shifting fractions of their loads to the backs of the porters. This was less inhuman than it sounds, as the porters' loads had lightened considerably in the past weeks.

The next discovery which Vartan and Marjorie made surprised both of them; Marjorie because it seemed to contradict all she had ever read of life at high altitudes, Vartan because it reminded him of a similar find at a much lower altitude on the slopes of Chimborazo. Scientifically he had expected to find nothing of the kind at nearly fifteen thousand feet in the Karakorum range. When he grasped the actual facts of his unintentional discovery, he was even more surprised.

They had been painfully plowing their way through soft snow all day, oppressed by the stupendous blue-black precipices of sheer rock, too steep to lodge a particle of snow or ice, on either hand, and they were thoroughly disheartened and chilled by their forbidding surroundings.

"If there were only a dead tree, or the bones of a mountain goat, or something, to relieve this everlasting snow and those uncompromising cliffs," Vartan sighed, "it wouldn't be bad. But it is so utterly dead that it makes my spine creep."

"We're far above the timber line," Marjorie laughed to encourage him, "and no goat ever grazed up here. They say mountain sheep sometimes stray into these awful blind alleys to get away from human beings."

"Are we as bad as all that? What worries me is the lack of fuel. Frozen beans and no coffee again tonight."

"I prefer tea, anyway."

"You're a cheerful soul, Miss Driscott. Just for that, I'll promise to get you out of this tomorrow at sunset."

"You really know where you are going?" she quizzed with a touch of seriousness.

"Good Lord, I hope so. Why do you look at me like that?"

"Let us get out the map," she answered quietly.

Without a word of protest, Vartan unfolded the map of the Marsden-Enright Central Asiatic Expedition, and spread it for her inspection.

"Where are we now?" she asked.

He indicated a spot on the lower left hand corner of the map.

"Did Marsden and Enright come this way?"

"No. I'm taking a short cut to the place I wish to reach first—certain fossil beds down here."

"I thought so," she remarked. "You're lost."

"I'm not, and I'll prove it to you."

"But this place where you say we are now is all white on Marsden and Enright's map. They knew nothing about it."

"Granted. But this is a geological map, principally. Now, if you know how to read such a map properly, you don't need a mass of details. All that is necessary is a carefully laid down set of contours in the neighborhood of where you are. Look at these. Continue them up through the white part of the map in the most natural way you can think of, and you find what? These parallel ranges of precipices that are hemming us in now. It's all as plain as an automobile club sign in California. I came this way deliberately, to avoid some of the hardships and difficulties that nearly sent Marsden and Enright home empty handed."

"Geology is a mystery to me," she sighed. "I'll have to take

your word for it. But I would give half of my kingdom at this moment for one large, steaming cup of tea."

"Follow your leader," he laughed, "and I will show you the promised land tomorrow evening at five-thirty."

"From a high place? Don't tempt me."

"If it's high, I'll jump off. No; we shall walk down a long, gentle slope into a pleasant valley, flowing with milk—goats' milk, probably—and tea."

"You swear you are not lost?"

"On my honor."

"Then I shall be more comfortable. Aren't those black precipices frightful? I feel as if they were about to come crashing down to bury us under millions of tons of rock colder than ice."

"I'm awfully sorry, Miss Driscott, about that cup of tea. But really we must conserve our supply of canned heat for emergencies."

"I know. Don't mind me. I was only teasing you."

They trudged on in silence for some minutes, when Vartan, glancing up, sighted something which made his heart leap.

"Look," he said, pointing to a spot about five miles distant at the base of a stupendous precipice of bare black rock. "Fog."

"Is that a miracle?" she laughed.

"Almost. Where there's fog there's warmth; where there's warmth there may be heat. We shall camp there tonight."

"It will be rather cheerless in the mist, won't it?"

"Not half so much so as a sleeping bag on this snow when it freezes hard again. Ali! To the left; over by the big black cliff."

Vartan's optimistic guess proved correct. As the caravan neared the terrific mass of rock, soaring up above their creeping ant-train in one appalling surge of colossal, massive strength to the steely sky, every man in the caravan felt his spirits rise, and the tired ponies made one last, slushing spurt through the half-melted snow as they plunged into the mist.

"It must be a hot spring," Vartan prophesied.

He was right. From the base of the black cliff a gurgling, tumbling confusion of boiling water gushed out on a level platform of black talus, a mile broad and five miles long, to sink steaming down into the rocky drift and seek its subterranean lakes and rivers three miles or more beneath the perpetual snows. For nearly an hour they stood spellbound, gazing at the play of the huge black

The exquisite creatures were half resting, half flying on his outstretched fingers and palms. Lost in their perfect grace and airy beauty, he did not try to speculate on their visit to this inaccessible chasm of the mountains.

water bubbles that burst up from the roots of the cliff, glistened for a second like massive, sculptured domes of obsidian, to flatten and gush out over the racing river in majestic cohorts of ever widening waves.

Their frozen bones thawed out, and by tacit consent they separated, both with the same thought. A warm bath in a city flat is sometimes no better than a necessary bore, part of the dreary routine; in the right conditions it is the supreme luxury. The porters were already shouting their ecstasy in the steaming water.

The cup of tea was next. That duly enjoyed, Vartan strolled off alone, to revel in the sheer wonder and delight of this oasis of warmth in a desert of cold. As he stood watching the steaming river vanish as if by magic under the unmelting snow, a fairy touch brushed his cheek, and he looked up involuntarily. A cloud of downy white butterflies, large as deathshead moths, was fluttering and wheeling about his head. He put out his hand, and first one, then another, attracted by the unusual color, alit, until in all seven of the exquisite creatures were half resting, half flying on his outstretched fingers and palm. Lost in their perfect grace and airy beauty, he did not try to observe them or to speculate on their visit to this inaccessible chasm of the mountains. Then, subconsciously, he noticed the eyes of two of them. The eyes of the first glowed like a pair of tiny rubies set in its velvety head; those of the other were flaming emeralds.

"I've got it!" he shouted, unaware that he had uttered a word.

Marjorie came running up, breathless.

"Look! Aren't they perfect? See their eyes! Ah—that one has stayed long enough, and wants to be off. Never mind." He spread out both hands. "Here come a dozen more. The red of my hands seems to fascinate them. But not half so much as their eyes and wings fascinate me. Look at that princess on my little finger. Her eyes are a pale topaz. The prince sitting on my left thumb has eyes of amethyst. And the king perched on my middle finger prefers a sort of catseye. Fourteen pairs of eyes, and all different. And look at their wings—every conceivable shape and loop and airfoil, from blunt, stunted stubs to sweeping trains of satin like a queen's white robe of state. Look, I say! These beautiful things prove that we are not lost. We know where we are going."

"Do you?" she smiled. "Mr. Shane thought his black ice would give Mr. Brassey what he wanted."

In the excitement of the moment Vartan failed to grasp the full significance of her remark.

"I wasn't thinking of Brassey," he confessed. "My own preposterous hypothesis, as old Grimsby calls it, was in my mind. The mystery of those inconceivably rich fossil beds of our 1914 expedition is practically solved. Brassey's delphinium will be next. By the way," he exclaimed, "what do these butterflies live on, away up here?"

"Tea," she suggested. "There's plenty of hot water."

"No, but seriously, Miss Driscott. Have you seen any signs of plant life?"

"Not one. I'll explain your white butterflies when you explain my rainbow beetles."

Opening her left hand, she disclosed what looked at first like a flashing heap of jewels.

"I found these just under the snow, on top of the warm rocks, where the water disappears. There is a solid layer of them at least two inches thick, all huddled together like dried currants. Aren't they superb, even if they are so tiny.?"

He was about to reply when old Ali Baba rushed up, breathless and gesticulating. Pointing to the sheer black cliff at the left of the main stream gushing from the rocks, he insisted that they follow him and inspect his discovery. They did so, wondering what new surprise this enchanted spot could offer.

Their way to the cliff led over the easiest, broadest ascent. It was precisely the route that any ordinary human being would have chosen to reach the head of the springs. The smooth wall of glassy black rock at the top of the declivity might have been designed from the beginning of time to receive an inscription, and the men who had passed that way before Vartan ever thought of taking a shortcut to the fossil beds of his dreams, had evidently thought the same. As Ali, bursting with importance, underlined the short record with his moving finger, Vartan and Marjorie read their predecessors' modest carte de visite.

Antoon Heindricks and Johannes Van Sluys camped here, outward bound, December 18, 1934. Botanical Expedition, Haarlem Academy of Natural Sciences. Camped here, homeward bound, December 21, 1934.

Underneath, the same information was repeated in Dutch.

10

MUTINY

"HEY TURNED BACK RATHER ABRUPTLY," VARTAN remarked. "December 18th to the 21st. That gave them time for just one march on from here and back. I wonder what happened?"

"Perhaps they were stopped," Marjorie suggested naively.

"By whom? These white butterfles? Or your crown jewels—those beetles?"

"Neither, I think," she smiled. "Pardon my woman's obstinacy, but I don't think much of your map. Or is it your geology that is too confident?"

"You wait till tomorrow evening," he retorted, ruffling. "Then you'll see."

"What? Why Heindricks and Van Sluys turned back so suddenly? They were competent explorers, Mr. Vartan."

"Never heard of either of them. Still," he admitted generously, "that means nothing, either for or against. If it were a question of South America I would know all about them. But, until I started for London in answer to Mr. Brassey's cable, I never took the slightest interest in explorations in this region, except of course, to study the geological records of our own 1914 expedition. I'll bet those two Dutchmen simply got tired of the scenery and turned back."

"That wouldn't be like either Heindricks or Van Sluys," she demurred. " 'Intrepid' is a bold word to use, but it describes both of them."

"You have heard of these men?"

"Certainly. It was part of my work at Brassey House to abstract the records of all explorations in the Himalayas, the Karakorum and Tian Shan ranges—to say nothing of less easily reached places, where new plants may be looked for—so that our expeditions might profit by the experiences of others. Heindricks and Van Sluys made a journey through the Karakorum ranges that is almost a classic."

"Was this it?"

"The date—1934—settles that. This place must have been on their itinerary."

"What were they looking for?" he asked curiously.

"Nothing in particular, so far as their report shows. They were just exploring the mountains and high plateaus for the Haarlem Academy. Of course the botany of the region they traversed was their main concern."

"Did they mention my butterflies, or your beetles?"

"Not that I remember."

"That's strange. Surely naturalists would have recorded such freaks of nature."

"Perhaps it was the wrong season of the year for either the butterflies or the beetles to be conspicuous, as they are now," she pointed out.

"Very well," he agreed. "What about this tremendous hot spring? Did they mention it? This must be one of the greatest hot springs in the world."

For a fraction of a second she seemed to hesitate before replying.

"I don't recall their mentioning it," she answered. "But then, I might not have paid much attention to a detail—no matter how interesting of itself—that had nothing to do with plants."

"Of course. I'll bet you a dinner when we get home that these men left an elaborate account of this spot in their report."

"Done! I'll have roast turkey, mashed potatoes, creamed cauliflower and English plum pudding. Perhaps a glass of port, too."

"Don't," he implored. "We've got nothing but the eternal canned stuff again tonight."

"It will be steaming hot," she reminded him. Somewhat cheered, they followed Ali to dinner.

Anticipating a luxurious sleep on the warm rocks, all hands went early to bed. All seemed well till shortly before midnight,

when Vartan woke, conscious of an intolerable, stinging, burning itch all over his body. His first thought, rather naturally, was of Marjorie's 'jewels', the myriads of tiny, iridescent insects packed solid in a two inch layer under the snow. A hastily struck light acquitted these suspects. There was not an insect visible on his body, and his sleeping bag was as clean as usual. Hearing several of the porters tossing and muttering in their sleep, he walked over to inspect.

Old Ali was fully awake, groaning dismally but softly. Like the perfect caravan leader that he was, Ali Baba was not going to spoil his men's rest merely because he himself was having a bad night of it. Marjorie had seen Vartan's moving light, and hailed him softly.

"Can't you sleep?"

"No. Have you got it too?"

"Yes, whatever it is."

"May I come over?"

"Do. And please bring your light."

Careful examination of Marjorie's effects but deepened the mystery. No insect, apparently, was guilty in their distress. Moving about with the light, Vartan accidently cast it full on Marjorie's exposed throat. An angry red welt extended from chin to collar bone.

"Where do you feel it worst?" he asked casually.

"Here." She fingered her throat. "It's all I can do to refrain from tearing at it with my nails. But that would probably only make it worse."

"Undoubtedly." He stared at the back of his left hand, where a similar welt swelled up visibly. "I think we had better get out of here as fast as we can."

A chorus of dismay from the porters' quarters suddenly seconded the motion. Ali hurried over to Vartan, volubly explaining the situation in all of his many tongues but English. At last Vartan calmed the old fellow to the extent of uttering a single intelligible word, 'ponies'.

"I had better see what Ali thinks is wrong," he explained to Marjorie. "Dress for marching at once. We shall be out of here in ten minutes."

"Have you any idea what is the matter?" she called after him.

"Yes; but it may be wrong. I'll tell you later."

"Is it serious?"

"I think so. But don't worry. Get into your marching clothes."

Before investigating Ali's theory, Vartan got the groaning porters to work. They were ready enough to break camp in the middle of the night. To their simple minds it was clear that the vicinity of the boiling springs was populated by legions of aggressive devils. They couldn't get out of that accursed place too fast.

When finally Ali reduced himself to English, Vartan learned that the ponies also were showing signs of uneasiness. This however was not his most important news. He divulged in a whisper that one of the porters had developed an evil looking sore on his back, strangely like those from which the ponies had been suffering for days past.

"Did this man bathe in the hot water like the others?"

"Yes, Sahib. He stood in one of the hottest places, where the water comes up from the black rocks."

"I see. The pack's ready. Give the order to march."

"Which way?"

"Forward, of course."

"But, Sahib—"

"Forward!"

Grumbling to himself, Ali obeyed. At a sharp command from Vartan he ordered the men to step out for all that was in them. They needed but little urging, although the backs of several smarted and itched grievously under the heat and pressure of their heavy loads. In five minutes they were slushing through the last of the half melted snow and emerging on the hard, frozen surface. There was no moon. The fleeing caravan looked utterly forlorn and helpless in the icy starlight on the snow, and the colossal precipices on either hand seemed to stride forward in the dim light to unite and trample the presumptuous men who had violated their iron solitudes. Vartan hastened to overtake Marjorie. She was staggering slightly, but doing her best to keep up with the caravan.

"How do you feel now?" he asked.

She parried his question.

"Did you or any of the others drink any of that water?"

"No. Did you?"

"I swallowed some while I was bathing."

"We made the tea from snow water, as usual. Feeling queer?"

"I'm on fire."

"Inside?"

"Yes. Give me your arm. I'll stick it. Probably exercise will work it out."

"Shane told me you had grit," he said to encourage her. From the sensations of his own toughened skin he could only guess what hers must be. "Now you're going to prove that he knows what he's talking about."

She gripped his arm but made no reply.

The flight became a rout, then a horrible waking nightmare. First one porter suddenly threw away his pack, tore off his clothes, to wallow bellowing in the frozen snow, then another. Presently all of the natives, with the exception only of Ali Baba, were screaming and floundering, stark naked, in the snow. Like the two whites, Ali Baba endured his torments in silence, or at worst an occasional groan, too proud to yield to the devils that possessed his body.

Marjorie became violently ill. Vartan could do nothing for her.

"Leave me alone," she begged. "I'll get over it."

With instinctive common sense he took her at her word, and hurried off with Ali Baba to corral the ponies which had taken flight at the unaccountable antics of their human masters.

Nature, it is often said but seldom believed, is the best doctor. While human physicians were half roasting their wretched fever patients under stacks of heavy blankets, and driving them almost insane by depriving them of all liquids, instinct shouted for an ice pack and all the cold water the body could hold. Only when one unfortunate escaped, half demented, from his nurse, and drank a bucket of dirty water left in his room by a careless attendant, was the simple, natural way of reducing most fevers revealed. Vartan's porters, fortunately, had only nature to treat them. Their bodies were on fire; by jumping with all their weight on the ice crust they could reach the dry, frozen snow beneath. It was simple, and no doubt would have been questioned by a licensed practitioner had one been present, but it worked.

First one victim, then another, after a lapse of three frantic hours, ceased bellowing and crawled over the ice to try to locate his clothes in the dark. The worst was over—for those who had taken nature's prescription. Their violent exercise had kept their blood circulating. All being hardy and in first class physical condition, except for their 'burns', and the high mountain air being absolutely

free of germs, there was no danger of pneumonia or lesser evils. Those who had endured their torments to preserve what morale remained, still suffered intolerably. Vartan, seeing what had happened to the porters, ordered Ali to strip and take a snow bath. At first the old fellow protested vigorously. Vartan was obdurate, and Ali saved his dignity by retiring in the starlight to a distant spot, where only the eye of God could see his nakedness.

Vartan hurried over to Marjorie. She lay moaning, and was only too evidently unable to care for herself. Getting her attention at last, he explained what she must do.

"I'll take off your boots and your outer things, and crack the ice. Slip in naked. If you need help, shout. But you won't. It cured the porters and it will cure you." He hurried off to attend to his own raging skin.

Dawn strode into the craggy defile with startling abruptness. A faint yellow tinged the sky above one rampart for perhaps two minutes; the rays of the risen sun turned the loftiest pinnacle to glaring red, and instantly the narrow valley between the barren precipices was thrust into the day.

In that first shock of light, the huddled porters were the picture of wretchedness. Although their skins no longer burned, their spirits were broken. To their simple minds the tormented night was nothing more or less than a supernatural warning that their work was impious. Or, more crudely, they were in the pay of one who was in league with devils.

Ali had succeeded in clothing himself decently before the sun rose. Joining the porters, he proceeded to use his tongue. Vartan, also fully dressed, and feeling fairly comfortable, strolled up, fascinated. He would have given all he possessed at the moment to follow Ali's eloquent denunciations. As it was, he could only stand stock still and admire, as one by one the dazed porters shuffled to their half frozen feet and stumbled off to their regular duties. His satisfaction was tempered, however, when he observed the ugly red boils on the faces, hands and necks of the porters. Ali acted as if he were afflicted, and Vartan was only too well aware of his own disfigurements. He left Ali to superintend the getting of breakfast, and hurried off to search for Marjorie.

He found her sitting, fully clothed, on the edge of her snow bath. She glanced up at him with a rueful smile.

"Don't look at my neck. I know it's horrible."

"How do you feel? Inside, I mean?"

"Pretty awful. But snow helps. I've been eating it by the handful."

"Care for a hot drink?"

"There's no fuel."

"Yes, there is. Lots. This is an emergency. I'll use one can of our frozen heat. Tea or coffee?"

"Coffee. I'm frozen and as weak as a cat."

"The worst is over, I feel sure. Here; I'll help you up. Come over here and lie down in the sun. I'll get Ali's blankets and my own."

Having made her as comfortable as possible, he hurried off to brew her as stiff a pot of coffee as the stores afforded. It was a long business, at the high altitude, to get it hot enough, even in a pressure cooker, but at last he succeeded with Ali's expert help, and hastened back to her.

"Coffee!" he said, propping her up. "This will straighten you out."

"You will have some too?"

"Had mine already," he fibbed, "while I was making it."

She drank eagerly, and the steaming stimulant seemed to put new life into her.

"I'm going on," she announced after the fourth cup. "Don't hang back for me."

"Better not," he advised. "No," seeing the defiance in her eyes, "it is not only on your account. Ali tells me that some of the porters are too 'boily' to pack even twenty pounds. I shall order a halt till they recuperate."

"In this desolate place?" she protested in dismay.

"Can't be helped, although I hate to do it. Ali reports that there is almost a mutiny among the porters. Superstition and boils are a bad combination."

She sat up and looked him squarely in the eyes.

"Tell me the truth," she said. "Is there danger of a mutiny?"

"Yes."

"What will you do if it matures?"

"I haven't made up my mind yet. The sensible thing would be to go back to civilization with the mutineers, and turn them over to the proper authorities when we are out of danger."

"What does Ali say?"

"He's not saying much of anything at present. But I will bank on him to stick with us."

"So will I," she asserted. "Ali is intelligent."

"You remarked that once before," he laughed. "The other time it wasn't a compliment. What has changed your mind?"

"Nothing," she answered seriously. "My opinion is unaltered. Intelligence is good or bad according to circumstances. Pardon me if I say you do not understand Ali. I do. Thoroughly. I have walked with him ten hours to your one. And I know that he will always do the intelligent thing, simply because it will pay him best in the end. Now please don't think I am jealous of Ali's affection for you. He dislikes me as much as he likes you."

Vartan stared at her incredulously.

"You imply that I should have sent him back to Srinagar when Shane's black ice disappeared?"

"Don't let us go over that again," she begged. "All I want you to understand is this. If it comes to a serious disagreement with the men, watch Ali."

"I will," he promised. Her evident conviction caused him intense uneasiness. Was she right, after all, in her estimate of the grizzled, confiding Ali Baba, who recalled, irresistibly, a humble old tomcat, and he himself deluded? "You will have a chance," he continued, "of observing him as he is when off his guard."

"What do you mean?" she asked quickly.

"Simply this. I don't want to precipitate trouble by giving an unnecessary order. So I shall not force the porters to march today. I shall push on alone and reconnoitre."

"Alone?" she echoed in alarm.

"Why not? In the Andes I was once out of touch with human beings for twelve days, in rougher country than this. And I thought nothing of it."

"Can't I go too? We can trust Ali to keep the men in order till we return."

"No. I shall have to travel as fast as my limit lets me. You are no good at present for more than half a march."

"But, Mr. Vartan," she protested, "you surely cannot expect me to disobey my orders at this stage."

"Your orders? I don't understand."

"Mr. Brassey ordered me to accompany you as an observer."

"Spy?"

"Don't make it so hard for me," she begged.

"You mean you can't let me out of your sight?"

"If you persist in putting it rudely, yes."

"I see," he said. "But has it never occurred to you, Miss Driscott, that I am in command of this expedition?"

"It has."

"And don't you know that the leader of an expedition in unexplored territory has absolute authority? He is as supreme a despot as the captain of a vessel on the high seas."

"I know all that," she admitted. "Nevertheless I shall obey Mr. Brassey's order."

"And mutiny?"

"Yes."

"Then I shall put you under arrest. Now. Do you understand?"

"I do."

"You will remain here till my return." He unbuckled his holster and handed it to her with the revolver. "I shall tell Ali that you have orders to shoot any man who attempts to desert in my absence. That applies to him also. You suspect him; I don't. Take charge of the camp till I return."

"I might shoot you now," she said, a dangerous glint in her eyes, "and take charge of the expedition."

"You might," he retorted, turning his back on her. "But you won't." He tramped off, over the crunching ice.

"When will you be back?" she called after him.

"In twenty-four hours. If I'm not back in thirty-six, take the caravan back to Srinagar. I'm trusting to Grimsby's map and my own geological sense."

"You'll get lost."

"I shan't. And if you decide to run away in my absence and leave me stranded, cable my compliments to Brassey when you get to Srinagar, and tell him and all of his damned spies to go to hell. I'm going on."

"You—" she started, and suddenly burst out crying.

The dreary morning in camp passed uneventfully enough. Ali understood at once that Miss Driscott was in temporary command, and assured her that he would relieve her of all worry—and he did. At noon a comfortless meal was prepared as usual, and eaten in unusual silence. The men were brooding dangerously over their boils and their wrongs, real and imaginary. Marjorie boldly walked

among them, Vartan's revolver dangling suggestively on her hip. Although she hated to confess it even to herself, she was as weak as a sparrow, and had difficulty in making her legs behave. To have accompanied Vartan on his reconnaissance would have been a sheer impossiblity.

Convinced that Ali had the men in hand so far as open disobedience was concerned, she sought out the coldish comfort of her sleeping bag after lunch, and tried not to doze. Nature got the better of her, as her blood warmed, and she dropped off to sleep in the comparative heat of the afternoon sun. She awoke at sunset, vaguely conscious that a terrific debate had been going on for hours.

It had. Ali was cursing as he had never cursed in all his long, reprobate life. Porters were exhibiting their boils for his inspection in the most shameless fashion—primitives have neither respect nor disrespect for the decent white woman's taboos—and Marjorie suddenly realized that she was in the midst of a waking nightmare. The sun set just as she scrambled out of her sleeping bag. Before she reached the yelling knot of men, the icy cold of night had already gripped the precipices and their narrow, utterly desolate valley.

She spoke none of the languages of the porters. Ali was her one medium for the exchange of ideas.

"Tell them," she said, "that Vartan sahib has ordered me to shoot the first man who tries to leave this camp."

Ali translated. In the fast dying light she caught a hard impression of the fanatical fear etched on the brute faces of the porters. Their deepest superstitions had been roused, and she was dealing not with animals, but with brainless machines. One man started blundering off toward the ponies.

"Halt!" she cried.

Ali translated, adding embellishments of his own. The man, drunk with fear, persisted.

"Halt," she said steadily, almost persuasively. "Halt or I fire."

The man either did not comprehend Ali's translation of the order, or he despised a woman's command. At any rate he paid not the slightest attention.

Marjorie waited until he was about to mount one of the ponies. There was still sufficient light to see and be seen.

"Halt!" she cried, for the last time, raising her revolver and taking careful aim. The man was less than forty feet away; she

could scarcely miss her mark, although it was the first time in her life that she had pulled a trigger.

The mutineer grasped the pony's halter. There was a deafening report, the man reeled, and collapsed on the snow. For five seconds there was a dead silence, part horror, part fear.

"Ali," Marjorie commanded in a firm voice, "tell two men to attend to him. I aimed at the thick part of his leg, and I hit him. Don't tell them he is not badly hurt. Say I will shoot the next one dead."

It was pitch dark before the man's wound was bandaged.

"Herd them into a small circle," she ordered. "Tell them to get their sleeping things and lie down for the night. You too," she added, "or I'll shoot."

Not a word was spoken as the men, crunching over the fast freezing snow, lugged up their sleeping gear to the designated spot. Even voluble Ali was dumb. He knew an order when he heard one, and he was a good judge of human nature. That, coupled with the fact that he did not know how straight Marjorie could shoot by starlight, may have accounted for his passive attempt to sleep with the others.

Although she could hardly stand from weariness and exhaustion after her sickness, Marjorie stood guard all night. Her hand holding the revolver seemed to become a lump of ice, and her feet kept freezing to the ice on which she stood; but she never relaxed for an instant her rigid attention to the black human lumps on the ice at her feet. Once a man stirred and muttered threateningly in his sleep. She stealthily tightened her finger on the trigger, and slowly raised her arm. The man turned over and snored. With a sigh of relief she lowered her arm. To shoot to kill in self defense may be justifiable, but it is not pleasant.

The night that had seemed as if it would never end, ended. Again the icy crags glittered like fools' gold in the rising sun, and again, mercifully, the frozen air, in five seconds, lost its deathly, penetrating chill. The men, used all their lives to getting up at sunrise, slouched into sitting postures. One by one they rubbed the sleep from their eyes and saw the woman holding them prisoners. They remembered their wounded companion, and their faces hardened in rage and hate. Unable longer to restrain his frenzy, one man leaped shouting to his feet. Ali tried to drag him

down, but the man was beyond control. Instantly the thirty odd men were a brainless mob yelling for vengeance.

Ali did his best. It was useless. The porters seemed to focus all their superstitious fear and hate on the white woman who had stood guard over them all through their unwilling sleep. Marjorie, shaken for a moment, fled. Then, realizing that the pack was after her, she turned and faced them.

They halted irresolutely, remembering their wounded comrade. Ali, in the background, cursed and prayed at them to come back. They hesitated. Then one fanatic, driven frantic by superstitious fear and the pain of his ripening boils, lunged forward. She had no time to aim. Wildly raising her arm, she fired at the man's feet, and, by blessed luck, just grazed his calf.

Once more they retreated, as they had the night before, hopelessly beaten by a show of will power. This time they seemed to realize that the woman would, if necessary, shoot to kill. Ali spoke up.

"Let me start them back to Srinagar. I will lie to them. You wait here till Vartan sahib comes. Then follow us. He will know how to make them obey."

"No," she answered. "Vartan sahib ordered me to shoot any man who attempts to leave this camp. Order two men to help the man I just wounded."

Again the porters drew into a huddled knot on the ice, and again Marjorie stood rigidly on guard, the revolver poised in her hand.

Two hours passed, and the clear sunlight thawed out her frozen body. She began to doze on her feet. Suddenly she started, fully awake, aware that Ali was trying to attract her attention. She stared as in a dream in the direction of his arm. A black dot on the distant ice seemed to move. Raising her arm she fired three shots, and tumbled forward, face down on the ice, in a dead faint.

FORWARD

IT WAS A FULL TWENTY MINUTES BEFORE VARTAN, slushing through the soft snow, his lungs laboring to the point of agony to take in sufficient oxygen from the rarefied air, got within shouting distance of the camp. Keeping his head, he halted, pressed his hands against his heaving sides, waited till the wandering spots of black and red cleared from the void air before his eyes, and shouted.

"Shoot!"

Ali had rushed forward and wrenched the revolver from Marjorie's frozen grip when she collapsed. At first he had experienced no difficulty in keeping the maddened mob away from the object of their brainless rage; his lashing tongue had sufficed. But, as the tense minutes crawled by, and the porters began to believe that either Ali could not shoot, or would not, they had become bolder, creeping up a step at a time to their goal. What they might do when they reached it was perhaps a mystery even to themselves. The whole mad mutiny was an exhibition of sudden, unaccountable insanity. These sturdy hillmen, in their right minds, could no more have rebelled against reasonable authority, or have sought to attack a white woman, than they could have cut their own throats. The boldest of them had just lunged forward to clutch with both of his hands at Marjorie's head, when Vartan's shouted order ended Ali's indecision, and he fired.

Ali was cool. Although the attacker was obviously out of his mind, and as dangerous as a wild beast, Ali aimed only to

disable, not to kill. With remarkable and unexpected precision for a man who, presumably, was unused to firearms, he neatly shot the man through both hands, just as they clutched at Marjorie's throat. It was so neat a shot that it looked like blind luck. The mob halted. Ali glanced at the revolver and found it empty. He had used the last shell. To reload he must stoop and extract shells from the belt about Marjorie's waist.

Stunned for a moment by the unexpected shot, the mob hesitated irresolutely. The howls of their wounded comrade almost instantly roused them to fury. Before Ali's stiff fingers could extract the first shell from Marjorie's belt, he was bowled over and trampled into the slush under twenty milling feet, just as Vartan hurled himself into the fight.

He was unarmed. Planting himself across Marjorie's body, he used nature's weapons, his fists. The desperate crisis multiplied his muscles by ten. Not under any ordinary lash would he have fought as he fought then. It was all or nothing, life or death, and he had only his empty hands. That brief, terrific struggle was the supreme expression of his animal instinct for self-preservation. He tapped the great reservoir of strength and endurance that is in every man, and spent it to the limit. He was fighting madmen.

They took their terrific punishment unfeelingly. Blows that would have crumpled a sane adversary, glanced from their jaws, though more than one fractured with a crack that could have been heard a hundred feet in that clear air. Instinctively Vartan knew that his enemies were mad, and an impersonal third personality in his own consciousness, sitting aloof and apart from the brutal conflict, calmly reiterated the appalling fact that he, the defender, was also out of his mind. This cold observer, however, offered wise counsel: "Fight, and wait your chance."

The chance came. Two of the assailants were knocked out within a second of each other. In a flash Vartan had unbuckled his heavy belt. Armed with this he swung and slashed at the ferocious blotches of red that seethed up to confront him—he no longer distinguished human faces—till one savage cut after another told, and the flickering mist of crimson steadied before his eyes. Some hard, icy object was thrust into his left hand. Automatically he transferred it to his right, not losing a slash with the flailing belt. Ali had recovered sufficiently to retrieve and load the revolver.

Vartan fired, wildly, but in the air, high over the men's heads. The aloof monitor, who had told him that he also was mad, guided his arm.

The shattering volley of six shots routed the enemy, utterly, irrationally. Howling in superstitious fear, they fled over the slushy snow to the colossal black walls that hemmed them in like rats in a sewer. They were beaten, finally and completely. Vartan started to pursue, and desisted. His mind was coming back to him in overwhelming bursts of blinding sanity. The violence of the struggle had purged his blood of the last trace of poison. His legs gave way, and he sat down suddenly, laughing uncontrollably, in the wet snow. For the first time he realized that he had been clean out of his head since he, like all of the party, had bathed in the steaming black waters of the hot springs. The whole of his conversation with Marjorie before he tramped off alone to reconnoitre, flashed back on his memory. The sheer insanity of it all sobered him, and he rose unsteadily to his feet. To have left a woman in charge of thirty-two men on the verge of mutiny now stood out in its true light as the act of a dangerous lunatic.

Curiously enough, Vartan's first thought was not of Marjorie, but of Ali Baba. He looked up, to find the old fellow's eyes staring calmly, curiously, into his own.

"Well, Ali?"

Ali's reply was an unintelligible grunt, which might have meant anything from repressed applause to disgusted disapproval. A sudden suspicion struck Vartan.

"Did you bathe in the hot water the night before last when I ordered you to?"

"No, sahib."

"Why the devil not?" Vartan snapped.

"I was clean," Ali replied conclusively.

Vartan eyed him with suspicion.

"You're no fool," he said. "Still, you saved Miss Driscott's life, and probably mine too. So I shan't make you wash yourself against your holy will." For the first time he realized that Marjorie was in desperate need of help. He staggered to his feet. "Are you all right, Miss Driscott?"

"Yes," she moaned.

"What's wrong? Hurt anywhere?" He bent over her. "They didn't touch you?"

"No. But I fainted like a fool."

"Your face is all cut and bleeding. Ali! Make coffee and boil me some water. Use two tins of canned heat."

Ali scuttled off, and Vartan unbuckled the holster and cartridge belt around Marjorie's waist.

"I shan't apologise for my outrageous conduct," he said, buckling on the belt. "That would only make it worse. We were all out of our heads after bathing in that infernal water. All except Ali, that is."

"Ali?" she echoed in alarm. "I warned you to watch him."

"I did. He saved your life."

"Did he? Then I must have been wrong. Ali—", her voice trailed off. "I can't think clearly. What is the matter with me?"

"You'll be all right when the coffee comes," he soothed. "Old Ali has a regular bonfire going."

"Where are the porters?"

"Hanged if I know. Over there, trying to burrow into one of those big black cliffs, I suppose. I'll attend to them later."

"What will you do?"

"Never mind, till you've had your coffee. I want your advice. Head all right?"

"Oh, I feel so wretched," she confessed, almost sobbing. "I'm no good for anything."

"Steady. You've been a perfect brick. What seems to be the trouble?"

"My brain goes round. It was all right last night while I stood up."

"Want to get on your feet?" He scrutinized the snow which had melted under the warmth of her body. "Better get up," he said, "and come over by the fire, such as it is. Come on; it won't be so bad once you are up."

As he half led, half dragged her off to the insignificant fire, he turned his head and stared attentively at the outline of her body as it had lain in the snow. The deeper impressions were seething ferments of green slime which bubbled and boiled in the stark sunshine like corrupt yeast.

"Algæ of some sort," he remarked. "Probably as poisonous as concentrated toadstools. This is a cheerful spot, I must say. No wonder Heindricks and Van Sluys turned back. Virulent water, boils, burns and blisters, fetid slime, and a jumping-off

place. I have half a mind to follow the porters back to Srinagar."

Her convulsive clutch on his arm tightened.

"Algæ? Do you mean there are plants here?"

"Millions—billions—of them," he replied, watching her face closely. "You seem surprised?"

Physical illness had all but conquered her. She rallied, however, drawing on her second reserve, as Vartan, to save her life, had drawn on his.

"Of course," she said, with a sorry attempt at a laugh. "Algæ grow at practically all temperatures in which life is possible. So why not here?"

"Why not? These one-celled plants are the stuff on which perhaps my mutated white butterflies and your jewelled beetles feed. I'm right, Miss Driscott. In spite of myself, I'm on the right track of James Brassey's seeds and my own fossils."

"You mean you are lost?"

"Hopelessly—if I go on. I was all wrong about the white spot on Marsden and Enright's map. The contours I counted on don't exist. Marsden and Enright left their map blank here for two sufficient reasons. First, they did not come this way. Second, if they had, they would have turned back, like Heindricks and Van Sluys. I'm going on."

"With the porters?"

"No. After this row it would be impossible, even if they agreed to follow."

"Then how will you continue?"

"Alone."

She made no reply, but stood groggily watching Ali endeavoring to boil a quart of water. The old chap succeeding at last, Vartan took the steam kettle from him, and stalked off to the medicine chest to fetch some sterile gauze and to disinfect his hands, before touching the cuts on Marjorie's chin and forehead. She watched his preparations lazily.

"You needn't go to all that bother," she remarked. "The air must be practically sterile at this altitude."

"Possibly," he admitted. "But what about those algæ? They didn't look particularly dead to me."

With expert skill he attended to her cuts, and covered them with adhesive tape.

"This isn't the first time I've done this," he observed. "The halfbreeds on my jaunts in the Andes were always skinning their hands and faces just for the fun of the medical show afterward. Well, the next on the program is the porters. I can't do anything for their burns and boils, but I can do a lot for their souls. Ali! Find all the men and send them here. You won't need my gun. They're beaten."

Ali trudged off toward the black wall, chanting mournfully in his own tongue. It was not long before the mutineers answered the recall, and trailed slowly out from the black shadow of the cliff to learn their fate and beg for mercy. The violent exertions of their recent battle had sweated the last of the poison out of their systems. Lamenting in a minor key, they followed Ali to the place of judgment.

Vartan's sentence was brief. Through Ali he ordered them to return to Srinagar, and take the ponies with them, as soon as their burns healed sufficiently to make rapid travel possible.

The men were stunned. Their contrition was pitiable, but Vartan refused to rescind his command. Through their spokesman they protested that they were honest men; that they would serve Vartan faithfully to the death, and that their recent outburst was the mad sport of evil spirits of the accursed valley in which they were then encamped. Get them out of the valley, they implored, and they would do a march and a half a day for so long as Vartan sahib should desire.

Vartan disdained to reply. For reasons of his own he was through with them, and he welcomed this perfectly legitimate reason for dismissing them from his service. Ali took it for granted that the whole party was to return to Srinagar by the route they had already travelled. Vartan's present occupation therefore was incomprehensible to him. The leader of the expedition, with his own hands, was carefully selecting from the porters' packs a wide assortment of the most highly concentrated foods in the stores. These he proceeded to pack expertly. This part of his incomprehensible labor accomplished, Vartan rolled up his sleeping bag, strapped it to the heavy pack, hoisting the whole onto his shoulders, and marched off down the narrow valley in the direction from which he had come.

"Where are you going?" Marjorie called in alarm.

"I don't know."

"You're not going on alone?"

"Yes." He resumed his march.

"But what about me?"

"Return to Srinagar with the party," he called over his shoulder. "Ali will take care of you."

It was plain that he meant exactly what he said. She ran after him.

"You *can't* go on alone," she panted, catching up with him, and keeping step.

"I don't know whether I can or not until I try. I'm trying."

"What of me?"

"You will be perfectly safe with Ali. There's another revolver and plenty of ammunition in my kit, which I've left behind. Strap it on, if you feel doubtful. But it will be unnecessary. You didn't see Ali fight to save your life."

"Mr. Vartan," she pleaded, "you don't understand me. We are of the same race. If you go on alone, I am disgraced forever."

"If you were a man, that would be true. But you are a woman."

"Haven't I kept up with you? Have I ever whined?"

"No," he admitted. "Still, the fact remains that you are a woman. If I let you go on, I should never dare show my face in a civilized country again."

"Nonsense! The Countess Lohenwald did just as much."

"She had porters."

"What of it?" Seeing that she made no impression on his obduracy, Marjorie changed her attack. "I have told you," she said with slow emphasis, "that I do not trust Ali. If you send me back with him, you are deliberately exposing me to great danger."

Her tone caused him to halt.

"Will you swear," he demanded, "by whatever you hold sacred, that you are speaking the truth?"

"I swear."

"Even after all that Ali did for you? He risked his own life to protect yours."

"That makes no difference. I do not trust him."

"But he is an old man, Miss Driscott."

"Oh, why can't you see?" she burst out passionately.

"What?"

"Who your real friends are, and who are your enemies. Ali

does not like you, and he hates me. Why are men so stupid? Any woman could see that I am right with her eyes shut. You distrust me?"

Vartan nodded.

"Why?" she whispered.

They were now half a mile from the knot of porters. Before answering Marjorie's whispered question, Vartan unslung his pack and laid it on the snow.

"Sit down," he said. She obeyed in silence. "I am going on alone," he resumed. "Possibly I shall never return. This, most probably, is the last time we shall ever talk together. I distrust you, Miss Driscott, because you are a liar."

"Oh!" She leaped to her feet, her eyes blazing and her cheeks flaming. She clenched her fist as if about to strike him. Something in his eyes checked her, and she slumped down on the pack.

"Is it my deceit about the publicity for Northcliffs'?"

"No. That is merely a matter of business. Hardly the sort of thing that would justify a man in calling a girl a liar. Men have been shot for calling other men less than that. What the just penalty is for a man calling a girl a liar when she doesn't deserve it, I don't profess to know. The publicity has nothing to do with it."

"Then what has? I have a right to know."

"You have," he snapped. "Shane's slides."

Her face was the picture of bewilderment.

"What on earth have Mr. Shane's slides to do with me being the liar you say I am?"

"Just this. Shane's slides were stolen from Brassey's London office the afternoon before he and I sailed for Bombay. Remember? Of course you do. And do you recall what you told me in Bombay."

"That the slides had been returned, with a note."

"Rather a mysterious note, too, wasn't it?"

"Not if you know, as I do, how closely the spies have followed the experiments in the Brassey laboratories for the past fifteen years."

"So it is all clear to you, is it?"

"Not all clear. But it is quite reasonable."

"Indeed? Then what would you say if I were to tell you that Shane's slides were not returned to Brassey House?"

"I should not believe it."

"Well," said Vartan with quiet finality, "you will have to believe it. After you told us Shane's slides had been returned to Brassey House, I cabled to Brassey, asking him whether they had. His answer was one word, 'No.'"

"You made me swear to the truth," she said. "Now I ask you to tell me, on your word of honor as a man, whether what you have just told me is true. Did Mr. Brassey cable you that Mr. Shane's slides had not been returned?"

"He did."

Her eyes never left his face. "I believe you are telling the truth," she said at last. "And for this you call me a liar."

"You said Shane's slides had been returned. Brassey said they hadn't. Draw your own conclusions."

"How stupid men are!" she exclaimed, stamping her foot in a genuine rage. "Haven't I dinned it into you by this time that Mr. Brassey is dangerously close to a mania of suspicion? And who can blame him if he is? Scotland Yard hasn't caught one of those spies, and yet he still relies implicitly on their incompetent detectives. Can't you see what happened?"

"I confess that I cannot," he replied coldly.

"Why," she said with a short laugh, "the cable I received reporting the return of Mr. Shane's slides was not sent by Mr. Brassey. It was a forgery in his name."

"What reason would there be for such a forgery?" he demanded, watching her face closely.

"None whatever that I can see. It is of a piece with all the operations of those spies. They may know how they hope to attain their object—whatever it is—I don't."

"Swear to that?" he suggested.

"I swear."

"Very well. I shall take your word for it. And you really are in mortal terror of Ali Baba?"

"Not physical terror," she qualified. "But I fear and distrust him intensely."

"You don't want to go back with him?"

"If you order me back to Srinagar I shall take four of the porters and go by myself. I will not chance the journey back with Ali Baba."

"What you propose is out of the question."

"Will you consider an alternative?" Vartan nodded. "Let me come with you. I can pack my own supplies."

"Alone?" he queried.

"If you think it advisable. But I believe it would be better to take Ali with us. The porters can find their way back alone; several of them are experienced guides and leaders. I do not know where you think you are going," she continued. "But I do know that you will probably have urgent need for a good interpreter. And Ali, you must admit, is competent. Why not do as I advise?" she urged earnestly. "You must have Ali. And with you to watch him, I would not have the slightest fear of anything he might attempt."

Vartan's decision was made instantly.

"I shall take your advice." He shouldered his pack and started back toward the porters. "Not," he continued, "for any reason you have suggested. If we ever get back to civilization, I will tell you why I gave in. Ali should have the option of going on with us or returning with the porters."

Ali did not hesitate when the choice was offered him. In ten minutes he was ready, pack and all, and he had also equipped Marjorie. Before leaving the porters to meditate on the follies of mutiny, he gave detailed orders for their march back, and appointed a headman whose word was to be final in all disputes. Then, having helped Marjorie to adjust her pack, he shouldered his own, and the three marched off in the afternoon sunshine, down the narrow valley, their faces to the unknown.

"Does your pack hurt any of your burns?" he asked Marjorie.

She shook her head.

"Henceforth treat me exactly as you would a man on the march," she requested. "Don't hang back or make allowances because I am a woman."

"I'll take you at your word," he promised. "Step out! We shall not halt for longer than ten minutes at a time till we reach the end of this infernal valley, if we have to march all night. Ali! Go first and set the pace. You look like a hillman, whether you are one or not."

Glancing back, Marjorie saw a pathetic little procession straggling back over the snow. A sound of wailing followed the three down the desolate valley, as the heartbroken porters vented

their grief. For a moment the three paused, and Vartan spoke, his eyes suspiciously bright.

"They will be safe," he said. "It would be quite impossible to take ponies where we must go tomorrow, and I would not ask simple men like those poor fellows to gamble their lives against a stake that means nothing to them. You two have come of your own free will. While you yet have the opportunity, you may return to Srinagar if you wish, and I will think none the less of either of you. Ali?"

The grizzled old chap briefly shook his head.

"Miss Driscott?"

"Forward," she said.

12

SPORES

THE SEARCH ON WHICH VARTAN WAS ENGAGED was one of the most remarkable in the secret history of international intrigue. So carefully had the master players covered their hands that but few of the participants in the stupendously intricate game, which was now nearing its decisive throw, suspected one another's existence, and certainly more than one of the major players was totally in the dark concerning the rules of the game and and the sinister stakes involved.

Vartan for one, although he had doubted the professed object of the expedition from its beginning in Brassey's office, would have been completely surprised and not a little chagrined if, when he started forward with Marjorie and Ali, he had been informed of the hidden mainspring beneath all his bold decisions. Brassey, for another, conferring at the moment with his friend Inspector Ransome, would have been shocked into bland incredulity, could he have realized that his own professed object in sending out the expedition, namely the ultimate perpetuation of his brother James' memory, was not the major objective of all his efforts.

Ransome, for his part, admitted that he still might have something to learn on this, the most puzzling case of all his brilliant career. Shane of course was in much the same situation as Vartan, although he believed, not without cause, that he had at least a clue to the nature of that shovelful of soil which Brassey asserted to be the one immediate object of the expedition.

Unknown to all the actors, the black drama in which they were playing their respective parts was being staged simultaneously in two hemispheres. Great Britain, represented by Brassey and Ransome; Central Asia, with Vartan's expedition as the key move; Holland, with a group of reserved, quiet men of scientific training and pacific tastes, and finally the Italian Riviera, represented chiefly by a venerable player who suffered from heart disease and who was pretty much of a recluse, were the foci from which the intricate web of plot and counterplot diverged to the corners of the earth. The underground war between opposing factions had been going on for thirteen indecisive years. Vartan's expedition, it began to appear to those who knew at least two angles of the many-sided struggle, might well prove the turning point to victory or defeat.

On the same night that Vartan and his two companions were trudging over the frozen snow in their first march together, determined to reach the end of the valley by daybreak, a worn old man in the airy, comfortable study of his villa on the shores of the Mediterranean, pushed back his chair, and rose from his work, satisfied. The warm morning breeze fluttered the fronds of the windmill palm by the open window into rapid, rhythmic motion; a heavy scent of yellow jasmine drifted into the room, and the old man almost remembered for a moment that he had once had senses keen for beauty and a body that responded like an æolian harp to the infinitely varied music of nature. But that was fifty or sixty years ago, before his ambitions dried up his life, and he became nothing but a cold thinking-machine in an unfeeling husk.

The old man's face, as he glanced down at the microscope and litter of scattered slides on the glass-topped table, was without expression. He had suffered so many defeats, and achieved so many victories in his lifelong devotion to impersonal science and a fanatical slavery to what he considered his duty, that one success or failure the more left him cold. Master in his own sciences, he had served his human masters long and faithfully. Now, perhaps, he was about to put into their hands the great thing that all of the priceless gifts of his devoted genius had promised them and him.

His expressionless, cleanshaven mask of a face gave no certain clue to his nationality. The features were neither European nor Asiatic, although the whole cast of the face recalled characteristics that might be either. In Italy he might pass for a native of one of

the Baltic countries, his slightly oriental appearance being interpreted as a throwback to some forgotten ancestor in the Mongol hordes that submerged Europe in the thirteenth century. His Italian speech was pure and without trace of an accent, but he was not by birth an Italian. Like most educated Europeans he spoke French fluently, and his German was practically faultless. English he had no occasion to speak, although he read it perfectly as part of his scientific equipment. Whatever his father's name may have been, his own was Zanetti—Annibale Zanetti, in full, at least while he resided in Italy.

Surveying the litter of slides on the glass table, he stood as still as the dead, chin in hand, reflecting on what he had seen under the microscope. There were in all perhaps a hundred and fifty of the expertly prepared glass slides, each with its individual speck of dust permanently mounted for study.

"It is solved," he muttered in Italian. Picking up one of the slides, he ironically read aloud the neatly printed label. " 'Brassey House, London. Not to be taken from the laboratory.' " Blanks on the label provided for a brief, technical description of the specimen: " 'Series 118; No. 225. W. Shane.' "

Zanetti swept the slides into a large porcelain dish, arranged them neatly so that the printed labels of all were exposed, and slowly poured the contents of a bottle of acid over them. When the last trace of print had vanished, he emptied the slides into the waste jar, reached for an iron rod, and smashed them to bits. He had learned the one fact of value to him on those slides, and had no further use for them. He next jerked the old-fashioned bellpull, and waited till his personal servant appeared. Speaking in Italian, he gave his curt orders.

"Pack my bag for travelling. Close up the house when I go, and admit no one."

Half an hour later he was on his way to report to his masters.

Zanetti was not the only scientist who at that time was intensely interested in all but ultramicroscopic spores. Shane, rapidly convalescing in Srinagar, was also following the same trail, but with less success. Miss Tappan reported almost daily by cabled code to her employer what Shane was finding. The nurse, Dr. Wemyss, the chambermaid, and numerous loquacious tourists who had

cheered Shane's sick room, were the alert Miss Tappan's eager but unconscious aides. She had not one pair of eyes, but dozens, for Shane had become a universal favorite with both the management and the visitors at the inn. She herself of course kept discreetly in the background.

From all of the information furnished by her unwitting spies she gradually eliminated the unessential details, and isolated the one fact of importance. Shane, she learned, was bitterly disappointed with the results of his search. The slightest sediments of snow and ice which his porters had collected on the march back to Srinagar, revealed nothing of significance, and Shane sighed for the priceless lump of black ice which had cost him a pair of broken ankles.

Shane was not the man to waste time regretting. The very day he was promoted to a wheel chair, and allowed the freedom of the long verandah, he confided a long cablegram to the clerk to be transmitted to Charles Brassey. The message was discursive, because Shane realized the necessity of disguising his request.

On receiving the cable, Brassey hurried over to Scotland Yard and laid it before Ransome. The latter, as usual, failed to betray what he really thought about the matter, if anything.

"Why not let him do it, Charles? It won't cost much."

"It isn't the money," Brassey expostulated, rather hurt. "You know that, John. But is it wise?"

"I don't see why it isn't."

"Suppose some spy is watching him. If he finds anything of importance, it is sure to be discovered. Any competent agent could worm everything out of the hotel employees, with Shane himself unable to get about properly and keep his own eyes on his material."

"Nonsense," Ransome retorted.

"You seem pretty sure of yourself," Brassey remarked.

"Of course I am," Ransome rejoined. "And I have good reason to be. Now that things have come to a head, I don't mind telling you that Shane can't make a fool of us now, no matter how hard he tries."

"You mean he is being watched?"

"By one of our best agents." Ransome vouchsafed the information in a tone which was meant to imply that Scotland Yard, the moment it heard of Shane's return to Srinagar, had taken measures

to insure his fidelity to Brassey House. Miss Tappan, of course, had been living at the inn for weeks before Shane was invalided there. Ransome saw no reason, however, why he should tell Brassey this, or indeed anything of his conduct of the investigation.

"So you suspect Shane?" Brassey hinted.

"I didn't say that, Charles. I merely tried to indicate that Shane will be protected. Remember, he is a paleobotanist, not a trained detector of crooks. In his own line he is first rate—you told me so yourself; in my specialty I wouldn't give tuppence for either his skill or his experience. A mediocre spy could turn him inside out in five minutes. So let him go on with his work. I'll see that he isn't robbed." A sudden light dawned in the Inspector's eyes. "By Jove," he exclaimed, "I only hope and pray that some fool does try to rob him. Then we'll catch the idiot with all the evidence right on him. Cable Shane at once to go ahead as he wishes."

Two hours later Shane was overjoyed on receiving Brassey's permission to employ mountaineers, whose job would be to ascend the nearest glaciers and bring back samples of "fossil" ice. Brathwaites' as usual were to act as Brassey's agents; Shane could study the specimens at leisure in his wheeled chair.

Ransome was right about Shane. He meant well, but lacked caution. It was an easy matter for Miss Tappan to stimulate the chambermaid's vulgar curiosity to the point of reading the cable which Shane had received. Ransome had told Miss Tappan to use her eyes, and she did. Shortly after Shane received his message, Miss Tappan got one, an innocent code, from her chief. It instructed her to keep a sharp watch on Shane, and have any meddler in his affairs apprehended immediately. Miss Tappan slipped out to the cable office and handed in a cheering message on the state of "Richard's health".

Brathwaites' put six of their most skilful mountaineers on the commission. The results were highly gratifying. In ten days the hardy little party returned with about five gallons of melted ice-water as black as India ink. According to Shane's instructions they had poured off all the fairly clear water from successive samples of the fossil ice as it melted, and had kept only the heavy sediments. Repeating the process with the sediments as they settled still further, they had finally collected the very cream of the

ancient glacial dirt. Ice from only the deepest crevasses of the highest glaciers accessible had been considered at all.

With this treasure trove at his disposal, Shane set to work with his microscope. He was independent of daylight in his research, as the splendid instrument loaned by the diatom fanatic was artificially illuminated in the most up-to-date fashion. The first positive results convinced him that his work was important, although he failed to find what he was looking for specifically. At last his caution was aroused, and he instructed his nurse to say nothing to anyone. To aid her discretion, he did not invite her to look through the microscope. This had the inevitable effect of putting Miss Tappan on her mettle. To report satisfactorily to her employer she must find out at all costs, short of discovery in her attempt, exactly what Shane was doing.

In Miss Tappan's profession, such things as slightly altering the face so as to be unrecognizable even to an acquaintance in a dim light, and assuming the demeanour of a countess or of a kitchenmaid at a moment's notice, are mere matters of technique easily perfected by assiduous training. To obtain a master key from a chambermaid, or at least the duplicate of one, is a trivial task.

Miss Tappan's preparations were simple but complete. First, she provided for a victorious retreat, should she be defeated in her major engagement. For days she advertised her intention of taking an early excursion to the highest point that could be reached by motor road to see the sunrise. Therefore it was only natural that a swift, highpowered car with a native driver, should be waiting for her in front of the inn at four o'clock of the morning on which she planned her raid. Her wallet, hidden under her dress and secured by a gold chain which hung about her neck, was stuffed with sufficient currency to carry her to Harbin or Moscow if necessary. A long fur cloak and a complete change of clothes in a satchel in the women's room just off the hotel lobby were ready to be snatched up at a second's notice. Her retreat, should it be necessary, was perfectly provided for. She knew to its last turn the devious route her native driver must follow to permit her to see the sunrise as she desired, and she knew also that another, swifter car would be waiting less than five minutes' walk from the spot at which she would alight to take the trail—to the next curve in the winding mountain road. All this was just so much routine. The next was more delicate.

A bellboy's suit was easily "lifted" from the dressing room of the male employees of the inn. Miss Tappan had her passkey, and she knew the habits of every employee of the inn better than they themselves. By 3:30 of the fateful morning she was dressed in the bellboy's clothes, and silently slipping her key into the lock of Shane's door. Miss Tappan was indeed one of the most versatile of Scotland Yard's attachees.

Her first move in the room was to close the door after her. Her second was to let her eyes become accustomed to the dim light filtering through the east window, which was just graying against purple black in the first faint hint of the coming dawn. Then, cautiously as a cat, she felt her way to the table where Shane's specimens stood. From the chambermaid she had learned the exact disposition of every object on the table.

All would have gone well had Shane not coughed in his sleep. He was sleeping lightly, as his mind was still subconsciously at work on the previous day's knotty problems. Miss Tappan's stealthy tread over the carpet ceased instantly. Shane's nerves as instantly registered the abrupt, barely perceptible change. That, and his own cough, awoke him abruptly and fully.

"Who's there?" he demanded.

"The bellboy, sir. You called as I was passing down the hall. Are you ill, sir?"

"Not that I know of. Turn on the light, will you?"

Miss Tappan retreated toward the door.

"I can't find the button in the dark," she muttered.

"Never mind," Shane replied, "I'll switch on the reading lamp."

Before she could reach the door, the room was flooded with light. He saw her face. For a moment he thought he was dreaming. In that moment, she bolted out of the door, closed it instantaneously and noiselessly, and locked it. Before Shane could collect his senses, she was half way down the back stairs.

"Miss West!" he shouted at the top of his lungs. "Miss West!" Forgetting his ankles, he leaped from the bed, only to collapse with a groan. "Stop her," he shouted. "She stole my slides!"

By the time the night clerk and the genuine bellboy had entered the room, Miss Tappan was leaning back in the cosy seat

of the closed car, swathed luxuriously in her warm fur-lined coat, and telling the driver to hurry so as to catch the sunrise.

Shane's incoherent story succeeded only in convincing the clerk that the sick man had suffered a bad relapse. He ordered the bellboy to telephone for Doctor Wemyss. Shane swore.

"I tell you I saw her in this room, dressed as a bellboy. Miss West. She's wanted in London by Scotland Yard. Cable Charles Brassey if you don't believe me. Oh, you utter idiot! I'm not out of my head. Miss West—Miss Annetta West—was in this room less than five minutes ago. She cleaned me out in London, and she was just about to clean me again here. Stop her! Don't stand gaping there—oh, what the hell's the use? I can't walk, and you're as dumb as a doorknob."

By the time Wemyss arrived, Shane had almost decided to hold his tongue, and assent to the clerk's nightmare theory. The doctor took the patient's temperature and asked a few simple questions. Wemyss was no fool. He rang for the clerk, and met him in the hall.

"Mr. Shane is rational," he said. "I advise you to check up on your guests."

"But no one by the name of West is staying here, Dr. Wemyss."

"Is it possible?" the doctor mused.

"Of course it is, because it is the fact."

"I didn't mean that," the doctor explained patiently. "If one of your guests is a crook, would she register by her own name?"

The clerk began to be impressed.

"Has anyone left the inn since Mr. Shane called out?"

"I don't know. Miss Tappan planned to make an early trip to see the sunrise."

Wemyss withered him where he stood.

"Why didn't she wait till this evening? Call the police all along the road and have her stopped."

He hurried back to Shane's room.

"Who is this Miss West?"

"Damned if I know. I've decided not to remember. Know what that means?"

"Fairly well. I have instructed the clerk to warn the police and have her stopped. Is that all right?"

"As far as it goes. She'll go a long way farther. Police? Boneheads."

"You wish this to be hushed up?"

"Yes. Tell the guests that I had a bad nightmare. Poison that fool of a clerk as you go out. By the way, doctor, will you send a cable for me to Brassey, and keep it under your hat?"

"Certainly. Here's pencil and paper. Write out your message and I'll take it to the office at once."

Shane spared no words to explain the situation to Brassey. He handed the voluminous message to the doctor.

"There's plenty of money in my clothes. Take what you need, and for heaven's sake never breathe a word of this to anyone."

"I won't," the doctor promised, and hurried out.

Miss Tappan-West was not apprehended, because, being herself a police officer of a higher kind, she had anticipated every move of the inefficient police. By the time Charles Brassey had absorbed Shane's thunderbolt and was on his way to Ransome's house, Miss Tappan was comfortably seated in a first class compartment of an express train. Her destination was not Bombay, but a seaport on the other coast of India.

Brassey's interview with Ransome was somewhat stormy. A number of unpleasant facts were duly spread on the table, discussed in detail, and digested. For the first time Brassey learned that his former secretary, Miss West, whom he suspected of being an accomplice of John Arbold's—the factotum—in the theft of Shane's priceless slides from Brassey House, was in fact an employee of Scotland Yard, planted in Brassey House without its proprietor's knowledge, to preserve the honor of the House. Brassey didn't like it. He almost quarrelled with his old friend, John Ransome.

"But I did it to protect you," Ransome protested. "Miss Tappan—your Miss West—is one of our best detectives. How could I tell you she was one of our people without hampering her?"

"I don't know," Brassey exploded. "That is your work, John. But what I do want to know is this. If Miss West—or Tappan—did not steal Shane's slides, as he suspects—who did?"

"That," Ransome confessed, "is exactly what I am trying to find out. And," he continued, "I have every reason to believe that I have the solution in my hand. But it will take time to work out. My sending Miss Tappan to Srinagar was part of my plan for trapping the thief."

"You know who the thief is?"

"Not until I catch him. But I am morally certain that I do."

"Is it John Arbold?" Brassey demanded. "He disappeared with Miss West."

"Possibly," Ransome admitted. "I shall not say until I lay my hands on the man."

Brassey paced the floor, tormented by a new suspicion. For the first time in their long friendship, he doubted whether John Ransome was as shrewd a detective as he seemed still to think himself.

"You admit," he said, confronting his friend, "that your impeccable Miss Tappan has precipitated a mess? She can no longer observe at Srinagar."

"Obviously not," Ransome replied, somewhat nettled.

"Then you will recall her?"

"Not necessarily. She can still do her work in India. And I protest," he continued with some heat, "at your insinuations against Miss Tappan's efficiency. From Shane's cable, I infer that she was the victim of an unforseeable accident."

"Unforeseeable accidents happen only to dolts," Brassey blurted out, before he knew that he had spoken. "I beg your pardon, John," he continued contritely. "You know I didn't mean that."

"That is what makes it so devilishly true," Ransome replied quietly. "If we never spoke until we lost our tempers, liars would become extinct in one generation. To tell you the humiliating truth, I am sorely disappointed in Miss Tappan."

"Yet you will retain her?"

"Why not? Hereafter she shall only watch and wait. Anything more delicate will be entrusted to experienced men—our very best."

"Jamieson, for instance?" Brassey hinted.

"Possibly. As I told you weeks ago, he is already assigned to the case. Now, Charles, have patience, and don't let your suspicions run away with you. I'll tell you something I have hardly dared to confess to myself: this time *I've got my man.* But I must play safe till I can make him prove me right legally. You get my drift?"

Brassey felt ashamed of himself. Silently wringing his friend's hand, he turned away and left without a word. Ransome hurried off to Scotland Yard, confidently expecting to find a cabled report

from Miss Tappan awaiting him. He was disappointed, and silently damned the inefficiency of the cable service.

Hours passed, and still no message came from Miss Tappan. Ransome began to fear the worst. By midnight he was convinced that the worst had happened, and that Brassey's enemies and his own had eliminated Miss Tappan from the field of action. At last, after forty-eight sleepless hours, the tension was relieved. From an obscure station in the Punjab, where there would be no possible means of tracing her, Miss Tappan had cabled one word to her chief. It was perhaps a rash, girlish thing to do, but she felt perfectly safe, and could not deny herself the exquisite luxury of that last word. It was "Fathead".

Ransome crumpled the white slip and collapsed into a chair.

"My God," he groaned, "sunk from the inside."

He sat up with a jerk.

"I'll get them yet!" he cried, bringing his fist down on the mahogany table. "Jamieson shall hang Tappan with the other one. I've got them!"

He began pacing his office like a trapped tiger. It was not the first time the enemy had routed him. But this time he felt that the enemy had over-reached himself, to deliver all of his forces, in one rash sortie, into his own ready hand. For the present he could only wait and be ready to strike when the enemy exposed a flank.

While Ransome waited, an old man in Constantinople slowly decoded a cipher cable.

"It makes no difference now," he sighed, setting a match to the paper. "Shane's black ice is not the key, although it resemb es it. I have solved it completely, without his help." For a moment he brooded in bitter silence. "What does it all matter, after all? I'm nearly dead." Annibale Zanetti reached for his hat, and crawled from the hotel to keep an appointment with his masters.

13

VARTAN'S DISCOVERY

WITH BUT BRIEF HALTS ONCE EVERY HOUR AND a half, Vartan and his two companions had marched steadily all night over the frozen snow. Having fairly started on what they all realized was a desperate undertaking, they became strangely silent, and all night long the only words that passed were the necessary orders to halt or resume the march. Ali revealed himself as a resolute pacemaker, and for most of the night he led. Marjorie, although she had slept but little during the past forty hours, carried her heavy pack without a murmur, and kept close behind Ali. Vartan brought up the rear. He was more heavily loaded than the others, as in addition to his pack, he carried an icepick and about a hundred feet of coiled rope. For a part at least of the journey ahead of them he anticipated stiff climbing, and he wished to take no chances now that they were cut off completely from civilization.

Dawn broke, cheerlessly, and they found themselves entering a narrow defile between stupendous black precipices. The valley had narrowed to a huge chasm in the sheer rock barrier, as if in ages past the earthquakes and the gradual subsidence of the whole range had split the last rampart of the mountains asunder. As they progressed they encountered first a cold mist, which rapidly thickened to a dense fog, and then they found themselves groping their way over bare black slabs in rolling clouds of chilled steam. The temperature of the air was now several degrees above freezing point, and before they actually encountered the outgush, Ali and

Marjorie guessed that here at last was the main outlet of the subterranean river which sank under the snow at the hot springs. Vartan called a halt. The cold mist had cleared somewhat, permitting them to see for a radius of fifty feet.

"Both of you have marched like veterans," he said warmly. "Sorry I had to rush you, but we can't afford to dawdle on a trip like this. Shall we have breakfast? We can warm something by holding a tin in this water."

"Not for me, thank you," Marjorie answered decisively. "I prefer mine cold."

"Afraid of the water? Well, I hardly blame you, although there is absolutely no danger if you don't drink it or wash in it. I'd keep away from those slimes, if I were you." His warning was addressed to Ali. The old chap evidently did not hear, for he was bending down to scoop up some of the scarlet scum on his finger, when Vartan sharply ordered him to stop. "Ali! Keep away from that stuff. Poison."

"Is it?" Marjorie asked.

"Don't know for certain. But the green variety of those algæ made you pretty sick yesterday when you merely lay in them."

The rock slabs where the still warm water gushed up were crusted with a thick pelt of algæ of all colors of the rainbow, from violent blue to tawny orange and fiery red. They were beautiful enough, if taken at a glance; on closer inspection they looked unutterably foul, like the living essence of all disease.

Grateful for the rest, the three ate slowly and in silence. They had barely finished their breakfast when a muffled rumble, like a peal of distant thunder, rolled into the rocky chasm. Vartan held up his hand.

"Listen," he said. "The full cannonade will come in a moment. That is, if it performs as it did the day before yesterday."

He was not disappointed. The echo of the first shot buffeted itself dead against the black walls, only to be succeeded by a stupendous crescendo of knelling crashes that shook the very rock on which the three were seated.

"Ice," said Ali Baba when he could make himself heard.

"You guessed it," Vartan replied. "Come on. Pack up and trek. It is only a ten minute walk from here to the end. When we get there you can sleep all day, if you like, as we can't go on till

tomorrow in our exhausted condition. I've changed my mind about trying it today as I had intended."

They had followed him over the slimy rocks, skirting the brink of the evil black torrent that boiled up out of the rocks, and again they plunged into a wall of steam. Presently Vartan turned to the right, and began to ascend. A short, steep climb brought them once more up onto the snow, and into the blinding glare of the full sunlight. Glancing back they saw the long curtain of steam rolling up in the dead still air to the cloudless sky As it rose higher and higher it gradually thinned, finally dissolving completely in the perfect blue above.

"It's just a step or two more," Vartan encouraged. "Then we shall see round the end of that white curtain."

They followed him expectently, but quite unprepared for the spectacle which suddenly burst upon their vision as they scaled an outcrop of black rock and faced north. Vartan had seen it before. He said nothing. Marjorie uttered a breathless cry, and even old Ali, who knew the mountains, permitted a grunt of astonishment to escape him.

A full fourteen thousand feet below them, glowing like an azure opal in the clear morning sunlight, lay the vast expanse of an almost circular valley, fifty miles or more broad, surrounded by a sheer wall of snow-crowned precipices of glistening rock, orange and umber, cobalt blue and turquoise green, coral pink and delicate lavender, vivid in the sunshine. From that great height but little detail of the valley floor could be made out. Only a broad silver band, gleaming and flashing in the sunlight, roughly along the major axis of the round ellipse which was the valley, marked the course of a noble river. Following that band of silver instinctively with their eyes, the two who had not seen it before sought the cleft in the opposite wall which should be its natural outlet, and found none. The river seemed to plunge into the very roots of the mountains.

As their eyes swept slowly round the sublime sweep of the titanic precipices, a snowcapped amphitheatre of rock nearly three hundred miles in circumference, they learned what fed the mysterious river. From scores of clefts in the massive wall, distant torrents burst flashing into the sunlight, to plunge down to the valley floor ten thousand feet or more in sheer falls or cataracts of dazzling silver. Above most of these falls clouds of steamy mist

streamed up, iridescent with changing rainbow hues to the line of perpetual snow, where they vanished. Innumerable tributaries meandered from the bases of the falls to feed the main river, spreading their mazy courses over the azure floor in a tracery of silver.

Their contemplation of the wonder was broken by a sudden, shattering thunder that seemed to rise from the ground beneath their feet. Following Vartan's arm, they saw what they had not yet observed in their enchantment, as their eyes had not yet travelled completely round the sweep of the precipices. Less than a quarter of a mile from where they stood, a huge, festooned spear of green ice jutted far out over the valley fourteen thousand feet below. Following with their eyes down the precipitous face of the rock beneath the spear, they saw a succession of massive pinnacles and grotesque cathedrals of ice hanging precariously to the precipices, one above the other in dizzy equilibrium, for a sheer five thousand feet. Even as they looked, a deafening crash announced that one colossal mass of ice, its unwieldy bulk grown beyond the limit of balance during the iron cold of night, had snapped at last as the sun warmed it ever so slightly, and was about to take the plunge nearly three miles to the valley floor.

"Look!" Vartan shouted.

It was the green spear which had split less than a dozen yards from the precipice from which it seemed to grow. As if propelled, it leaped over the void, crashed down on the spire of a mighty cathedral five hundred feet below it, shattered the whole mass into a hundred enormous bounding fragments, which in turn destroyed the turrets and elaborate palaces below them, until in ten seconds a cascade of ice like a tumbled glacier suddenly hurled down a mountain side, was thundering and pealing on its chute to destruction.

The last echoed thunder died. They stared into one another's faces, stunned for a moment by this exhibition of what human beings glibly call the forces of nature. Vartan laughed, somewhat ashamed of his emotions, to break the spell which hung over all of them.

"Watch where the spear broke off," he said. "There's a waterfall coming."

He was right. The warm water which had gushed all night in tremendous volume to the very lip of the fall, only to freeze as it

fell or trickled ever more slowly over the fast-forming ice, now burst suddenly through the last trivial barrier and shot straight out into the sunlight in a steaming jet. Its initial momentum lessened, the broad jet became a mighty fall, plunging unbroken over half way down to the valley, till it struck the projecting wall and thence foamed down in a broad cataract, to become a tributary of the river.

Vartan's next remark made Marjorie's blood freeze.

"I'm going down," he said. "If you two don't care to come, you can start back and overtake the porters after you have had a good sleep in the sunshine. Anyone coming?"

"When?" Marjorie choked.

"Tomorrow. We must reach the bulge where the cataract begins away down there the minute the fall freezes solid. It is our only chance. We shall have twelve hours without danger of ice falls, and there will be no cataract, or at worst only a little ice that low down."

"Isn't there a safer way?" she objected.

"There is no other way at all." He unslung his binoculars and handed them to her. "See for yourself."

She saw. One promising descent after another ended in a precipice of hundreds of feet. Only where the falls and cataracts, aided by the diurnal onslaught of expanding ice, had cleft deep chasms in the face of the rock, was there a chance to descend. Vartan was right. A descent down the weathered watercourse nearest them by daylight would be a hazardous but feasible project, provided they could negotiate the cataract which foamed down the last five thousand feet. This probably would be impossible until the cataract either ceased to flow or froze solid. She handed back the binoculars without comment.

"Ali?" Vartan said, offering him the glasses. Ali curtly shook his head. He had seen places almost as bad, and he was ready to take a chance. Vartan himself eagerly scanned the floor of the valley through the glasses. His previous observations were confirmed. The unmistakable patchwork of cultivated land showed that the valley was inhabited. Handing Marjorie the glasses, he called her attention to the evidences of human beings.

"Those people down there can't have lived in that spot since the beginning of time. There must be some easier way into the valley. That is the prospect I am gambling on, for I should not

care to come back this way. Probably Heindricks and Van Sluys turned back because they were unwilling to take the chance we are. Now, all hands must sleep for as much of the next twenty hours as possible. It will be warm and dry on these rocks. Let us sleep here."

Without further ado they slipped into their sleeping bags and slept the sleep of exhaustion. When they awoke shortly before sunset, the air was already chilled. They swallowed their rations and moved their sleeping bags to the sheltered side of the outcrop. Huddling together for greater warmth, they dropped off again just as the frost gripped the rushing water, and the nightly freeze began.

They slept till sunrise. Knowing what was ahead of them, they ate a double ration, and waited for the accumulated ice of the night to crash its descent to the valley.

When the last echo had died, Vartan rose and strapped on his pack. The others silently prepared to follow. Vartan nodded, and they started down to the steaming river bed. Their zero hour had come.

The first thousand feet was the worst, as the ice filled every crevice of the precipitous rock down which they cut their way a treacherous step at a time. Being the most experienced, Vartan went first and hacked out the steps. Marjorie was next, and Ali formed the anchor. If either Vartan or Marjorie missed their footing, the rope and Ali were their last hope.

"We shall have to make better time than this," Vartan announced at the end of two hours. "Otherwise we shall be caught after sunrise tomorrow on the cataract. I'm going to try it a little to the left, and see if we can't avoid some of this ice."

Their next two thousand feet was finger and toe work from one eight or ten inch ledge to the next, twenty or thirty feet below. Ali, like Vartan, seemed to have neither nerves nor stomach; Marjorie frequently had to be lowered bodily by the rope. This phase lasted till noon, and Vartan had difficulty in concealing his anxiety from his companions. Unless they made considerably better time on the next three or four thousand feet, they could not possibly hope to arrive at the cataract by nightfall. He began working his way back to the icy fissures under the fall.

Again in grim silence they resumed their perilous labor of step cutting. As the afternoon wore on, the ice became more

slippery, but it also, fortunately, became less abundant. It was possible, now and then, to find a cleft or chimney comparatively free, and occasionally they made rapid progress for a hundred yards down practically bare rock. They had no time to admire the beauty of the valley opening like a wild rose in the late afternoon sun beneath them; their whole attention was fixed on the desperate task before them.

Presently water began trickling down the crevices of the rock. They guessed the cause. The fall was already beginning to freeze at its source, damming back part of the torrent which now found its outlet farther back. Before long the fall itself would freeze. But before it finally congealed, it would continue to deluge the face of the cliff with curtains of spray, swinging ever closer in toward the precipices, until once more the fantastic pinnacles and crags of ice would resume their nightly growth.

The icy deluge rapidly gathered volume, and they were forced to flee—or rather crawl like flies—for their lives back to the steeper rock clear of the torrent. Their agonizing hand and foot descent began all over again. For an hour and a half they dropped from one ledge to another, so narrow that they could stand on them with safety only by facing the wall and pressing against it with desperate coolness.

The sun set when they were still five hundred feet above their goal—the beginning of the cataract. That last five hundred feet in the sudden darkness was the crucial point of their whole perilous descent. Even Vartan began to despair of reaching the cataract that evening, and tried not to think of a possible ten hours in the darkness, clinging in dizzy equilibrium to the face of a six thousand foot precipice. He and Ali might have done it, but Marjorie, he dreaded, must collapse and drag them with her to destruction.

"I'm going ahead," he announced, "to find a way back to the cleft." The water had practically stopped coming down. "If the rope tightens, hang onto Miss Driscott." Feeling in his coat pocket he found his clasp knife. Opening it, he thrust the blade through his sleeve and half closed the knife so that it would cling to the sleeve without his attention. If the rope tightened, as he had expressed it, he would cut himself free and give the others their chance to live.

With infinite caution they followed him a step at a time,

planting their toes in the cracks he described minutely, coolly, and not moving a muscle until he told them how to take the next step. Ali rather enjoyed this supreme test of his mountaineering skill; Marjorie tried to pray, but was too stunned to think of any petition.

They were now well below the line of perpetual cold. If only they could reach the head of the cataract, now dry, as the fall had frozen at its source nearly nine thousand feet higher, their sharpest dangers would be over. At last Vartan uttered a quiet word of encouragement. He had worked his way back into the chimney leading down to the cataract. While waiting for the others to join him, he put away his knife.

"Thank Heaven that is over," Marjorie sighed as he grasped her by the arm. "Is that the worst?"

"The very worst," he assured her. "The rest will be easy."

Vartan had overlooked one danger which he should have foreseen. The comparatively easy slope of the cataract was rendered extremely dangerous by the slippery slime of algæ encrusting every rock. The climbers had to use all the caution they had exercised in their descent over sheer ice, and the last five thousand feet proved as hazardous as the first.

The gray hint of dawn found them slipping and scrambling over the precipitous slime seven hundred feet from their goal. Below them a wilderness of enormous blocks of shattered ice, tumbled together in the utmost confusion for a radius of three miles from the base of the precipice, menaced them with a new danger. Vartan had of course foreseen this, but he had erred in his estimate of the time necessary to descend the cataract.

"Hurry!" he shouted, setting the example recklessly.

As the sun rose they entered the labyrinth of shattered blocks.

"We can't make it," he said. "The farther we go now, the greater the danger. Back to the base of the cliff!"

Huddled against the slimy rock, and protected as well as might be in front by a huge square block of ice which towered up like an office building, they waited tensely for the opening shot of the morning bombardment from above. The first sharp crack of splitting ice, nearly fourteen thousand feet above them, whistled thinly down to the valley as the great green spear snapped, and they huddled closer to the slimy wall. They heard the shattered spear descending, at first a faint, far-off rush like a flaming torch hurled

over a precipice, then a shrill swish which rose instantly to an ever sharper shriek as the spear flashed down to shatter itself on the icy wilderness before them.

The avalanche of ruined cathedrals was already thundering down to destruction with an appalling volume of sound that stunned the listeners all but senseless. When the ice fall crashed in a never-ending succession of splintering detonations, and thousands of colossal fragments bounded high into the air to come down a mile from where they first struck, the helpless watchers were without feeling. Had they been struck by a fragment of that gigantic hail, they would have expired without pain. Such is nature's blessed anæsthetic of rational fear.

They had chosen their refuge well. Although the fall of ice seemed never ending, it lasted at the most a bare five minutes. It was over. For some moments they were too stunned to move, or to breathe their thanks for a merciful deliverance. Ali recovered first. He groaned, and mechanically strapped on his heavy pack. Vartan assisted Marjorie to her feet, and silently turned to seek a way out of the icy labyrinth.

Three hours later they had emerged on a mossy meadow, vivid with innumerable flowers. The mild air of the little paradise in which they found themselves invited rest. It was the first balmy air they had breathed since leaving Srinagar. Too weary to remove their packs, they flung themselves on the flowers in a stupor of exhaustion.

Their descent the previous day had not passed unobserved. Certain inhabitants of the valley, their sight trained by long years of observation to the acuteness of the sharpest of animal instincts, had followed every move of the three from the moment they emerged from the icy cleft to try their luck on the dry, precipitous face of the cliff. At nightfall the watchers naturally had lost sight of their quarry. Resuming their guard shortly before daybreak, they easily picked out the three moving spots on the last sharp slope of the cataract. Guessing instinctively that the three would take shelter from the ice fall at the base of the cliffs, they had waited patiently for the last block of ice to subside in its hazardous, random wanderings to its final resting place. Then they ascended a slight rise, and sat down silently on the flowery knoll to await the emergence of their prey.

The fan shaped wilderness of ice was perhaps ten miles in

circumference. Sitting motionless, without word or sound of any kind, the watchers scanned the edge of the fan incessantly, sweeping their gaze back and forth over every yard of the possible exit. At last their patience was rewarded. Three human figures emerged onto the sunny meadow. At a gesture from the leader, the five rose and silently made their way down to the exhausted forms half buried in the lush flowers a quarter of a mile away.

The sleepers could not be aroused by any ordinary shaking, and the silent patrol quickly desisted from its efforts to wake the intruders. They sat motionless on the grass, and let six hours slip by in the mellow sunlight. Then the leader tried again. He succeeded in eliciting a petulant curse from Ali Baba. Seeing the sleeper's lips move, the leader persisted in his efforts until Ali awoke fully. His amazed shout instantly roused Vartan and Marjorie.

At first they thought they were still in the throes of a horrible nightmare induced by their nerve-racking descent. But, at the second glance, they realized that the hideous five gathered in a silent ring around them were real and at least part human. Closer inspection revealed to their amazement that their visitors were wholly human, although hideously, almost incredibly deformed. The five of the patrol and the three intruders sat silently staring into one another's faces. Not a word was said on either side. An expressive dumb show by the leader of the patrol presently explained the silence on one side at least; an ignored question, asked first in half a dozen languages by Ali Baba, and then repeated in a shout without attracting the slightest attention, threw further light on the physical deficiencies of the five monstrous human creatures. To a man they were deaf mutes.

"Deaf and dumb from birth," Vartan remarked in a shocked voice, "in addition to their other afflictions. Look at that poor devil's feet."

Their gaze followed his to the clumsy, toeless stumps which served one of the five as feet. No sooner had they silently apprehended this misfortune, than their eyes were attracted by that of his right hand neighbor. This man, as if to compensate his companion's lack, had eight toes on each foot, and four fingers and two enormous thumbs on each hand. Not one of the five had a normal foot or hand. The twisted bodies of all were covered by long, matted yellow hair, like that of an unwashed collie dog. Apparen-

tly unconscious of their abnormalities, the men of the patrol eyed the three intruders in amazed astonishment, frequently expressing their disgust by gestures that all but spoke.

Marjorie was the first to note and exclaim at the crowning eccentricity of their captors. A stunted monster, muscular as a gorilla—as indeed were all five—was a cyclops. One, and only one, enormous red eye glowed and rolled lasciviously, not from the centre of his forehead, but from the side of his head where his right ear should have been.

They were not 'freaks of nature;' far from it. They were the natural and indeed inevitable offspring of the enviroment in which nature had nurtured them, and they could not have been other than they were. This the three 'normal' human beings were to realize to the hilt when, as they did in the next few days, they got a profound insight into the origin of what most of us call 'normality' of the human stock. But for a happy chance, we also might have been like those five monsters. In their own habitat they were the 'normal' human beings; Vartan, Ali and Marjorie weret he repulsive deformities.

Ir presently became plain that the muscular monsters considered the three intruders their prisoners, and desired to take them into custody. Seeing the exhausted state of their captives, the patrol exhibited at least the beginnings of human decency. The gorilla-like cyclops was loaded with the three packs, which he unconcernedly carried by the straps around his muscular neck.

With a glance at the sun, as if to assure himself of the time, the cyclops hustled the party off in the direction of the main river.

"No use resisting," Vartan observed. "Besides, I really am curious to see where these fellows live, and what they do for a living."

Marjorie scarcely heard, and Ali seemed absorbed in his own thoughts. Marjorie, as a matter of fact, was lost in contemplation of the strange beauties at her feet.

"Look," she cried. "Literally hundreds of new species of the most gorgeously exquisite flowers imaginable."

"How do you know they are new?" Vartan asked. "I admit they are the most beautiful I ever saw. But are you sure they are new?"

"Positive. The very structure is different from that of any species recorded. I know, from my work at Brassey House."

She stooped to pluck a low-growing saffron lily. "Seventeen petals," she counted, "twenty nine stamens, eleven pistils. Botanically, it is impossible. Yet there it grows by the acre."

"Not impossible," he said. "Merely a mutation—like those poor fellows. Lord! I'm glad we risked that climb. It all begins to dovetail together like a beautiful physical experiment. Look at that butterfly—that shining green one. Now, I'll bet you another dinner." His enthusiasm suddenly rose to a sharp shout of triumph. "Fossils!"

They were marching down what might have been the bed of a dry creek, whose bleached ochre walls towered up forty or fifty feet on either hand. The conglomerate of the cliffs was a dense compact of fossilized bones, of every conceivable size, from enormous femurs to tiny, birdlike skulls half exposed in the sandy cement. Vartan, escaping from his guard, dashed to the nearest wall.

"Not Grimsby's or Marsden and Enright's beds, but better, richer, infinitely more varied," he exulted. The toeless guard gently extinguished Vartan's enthusiasm and induced him to rejoin the party. For the next half hour Vartan had eyes only for the extraordinarily rich stratum of fossils which the dry creek cleft through.

Emerging presently onto a gentle slope above the main river, they saw their objective before them. A long flat boat, little more than a raft pointed at either end, was moored to a stunted tree on the bank of the flashing river. Evidently the patrol intended taking its prisoners to their destination by water.

While two of the guards were busied about the raft, preparatory to departure, Marjorie, free for the moment, strolled over toward a clump of tall, azure spikes blooming in serene isolation by the edge of a black pool. Vartan also spied the flower, but his geologist's eye roved instantly to the jet black pool mirroring all the blue of heaven.

"Oil!" he shouted.

"*Delphinium Brassei!*" she cried, plucking one of the perfect spires.

Ali watched the antics of his companions with aloof reserve. Nevertheless his eyes betrayed more than a passing curiosity as Marjorie, bearing her priceless trophy, preceded him onto the barge.

"Fossils, oil, delphiniums, all at one swoop," Vartan triumphed. "They can boil us in oil now, for all I care. My 'preposterous hypothesis' is proved."

"Hadn't you better take your shovelful of dirt while you can get it?" she suggested.

"No hurry. There will be acres more of Brassey's larkspurs farther on, or I'm all wrong."

"You can't tell," she demurred "If we see more, you can throw away what you have."

"Safety first?" he laughed. "Very well. To keep the peace, I'll get the plant, roots and all, with ten pounds of the dirt in which it grows."

From the unresisting cyclops he reclaimed his ice pick and started toward the azure clump. The burning eye followed him curiously, intently. Vartan began loosening the soil with his pick, unconscious that his every movement was being watched minutely. He had just got down on his knees to scoop out the dirt around the roots with his hands, when Marjorie called a sharp warning. She thought the gorilla-like cyclops was about to tear Vartan to pieces.

Nothing of the kind. The cyclops heaved the pick far out into the river, grasped Vartan's shoulder in one muscular hand, and half pushed, half tossed him aboard the raft. All were aboard now, except the cyclops. Wading after the raft, he shoved it off with all his strength, leaped awkwardly aboard, grasped his huge clumsy paddle, and started rowing vigorously with the rest of the deaf mutes.

THEIR PROGRESS DOWN THE BROAD, OILY RIVER was uneventful till the late afternoon shadows crept out from the base of the western wall, and almost visibly as they watched, night stole upon the valley. The five ungainly deaf mutes paid not the slightest attention to their prisoners. Escape was impossible; the guards mechanically concentrated on their task of keeping the raft in the main current far from either shore. Occasionally Vartan and his companions caught glimpses of human beings laboring in the flowery meadows, but what soil they tilled or what crops they cultivated remained matters of conjecture.

Within ten minutes it would be dark in the sector of the valley through which they were now passing. The cyclops, who seemed to be the captain of the guard, raised his paddle once from the water as a signal to the others. Instantly the raft changed direction, and slanted toward a grove of huge crimson trees on the right bank. A maze of gnarled and knotted roots grew far out into the stream, but the five paddlers guided their unwieldy craft unerringly through the tortuous channels to the mooring place.

Their approach had been noted. Half a dozen human beings, deformed like the five of the guard, but less hideously, made fast the raft to a straddling root, and helped both the guards and their prisoners ashore. By brief but expressive dumb show, the guards made the shore men understand where and how the prisoners had had been captured The disposition of the prisoners for the night

was also settled in the same expeditious manner. Words could not have conveyed as much in as short a time. The raft men followed the cyclops into the grove; three of the shore men took charge of the prisoners and led them away in the opposite direction.

All this took place in eerie silence. Vartan was about to make some remarks to hearten the others when, to his astonishment, their three new guards began talking with voluble animation among themselves. They had conversed by dumb show with the raft men, because the latter had no other means of human communication; they themselves, although obviously abnormal, could at least speak and hear.

"Follow what they say," Vartan commanded sharply.

Ali was automatically doing his best. Vartan's outburst of speech seemed to astonish the three guards as greatly as their own had him. Stopping abruptly, they peered into the faces of their captives. Under the dense foliage of the grove the last of the light was just about gone. Nevertheless the three guards persisted in attempting to scrutinize their prisoners, and even ran curiously deformed fingers over what, to them, were inhumanly abnormal faces. The logic of their actions was clear enough. To these misshapen, hirsute creatures, it was inconceivable that Marjorie, at any rate, with her clear, hairless face and hands could be human. Vartan and Ali, on account of their straight arms and legs were also suspect. That such monstrosities as these three were, should be gifted with speech, the distinctive mark of the higher castes in the valley, passed the comprehension of the guards.

"What did they say?" Vartan demanded of Ali.

"They do not talk a language," Ali replied in baffled disgust.

"Then what do they talk?"

"Sounds."

"In other words, you're up a tree, Ali. Brathwaites' guaranteed you as a first rate, all round interpreter for any part of Asia except Tibet. We're nowhere near Tibet. What's the matter with you?"

Ali muttered an apology as his guard hustled him off ahead of the others. Marjorie found herself behind with Vartan.

"Do you think," she asked in a low tone, "that Ali is as ignorant as he pretends?"

"Still suspecting?" Vartan laughed.

"These deformities must be Asiatics, whatever else they are," she persisted.

"Obviously," Vartan rejoined. "We are still in Asia."

"Brathwaites' told me Ali could get the drift of practically any Asiatic dialect except Tibetan."

"Well," Vartan retorted with an air of finality, "until you find some stronger basis for your suspicions of poor old Ali, I'm going to trust him. Any man who can come down a precipice in the dark as Ali did last night, is a good sort. What are our freak friends going to do with us now? I see a light through the trees."

The intentions of the guards were honorable. Emerging from the gloomy grove, they crossed a small meadow to a high dirt bank, evidently part of an old earthquake fault line, against which a smokeless jet of almost white flame shone steadily in the clear night air.

"Does it strike you that we have lost all our baggage?" Vartan asked as they approached the fire.

"It does. Now I shan't be able to keep up appearances any longer. I'll be a wreck tomorrow morning."

In spite of their banter and apparent indifference to what the immediate future might bring forth, both Vartan and Marjorie were profoundly disturbed. The very patience and orderly conduct of their captors was alarming. Creatures who could respect the discipline of an absent authority as these evidently did, must be strongly governed. What would their chief think of uninvited visitors? Nothing pleasant, probably.

"We shall be warm enough without our blankets," Vartan prophesied, as they approached the jet of white fire. "As I guessed, natural gas. No wonder. From all the geology of this valley there must be a fair sized ocean of oil under it. What's up? Supper?"

It was. One of the guards was told off to keep an eye on the prisoners, while the other two went foraging in the meadow. Their foray was short. In about three minutes they returned with a dozen large fleshy tubers like enormous blue potatoes, which they had rooted up from the marshier ground some yards from the jet. There were six to be fed; to the prisoners the supply of blue roots seemed sufficient for at least fifteen able bodied men.

The roots were skilfully roasted by one of the guards, who turned them constantly on the red hot clay at the very edge of the jet. As the roasting reached its critical stage, the two idle guards

offered the cook excited advice. Some culinary disaster was evidently about to happen. As usual, too many cooks spoiled the dinner. With a deafening report the overcooked blue 'potatoes' exploded simultaneously into enormous balls of white fluff, which were reduced to charcoal before the chagrined cook could salvage them. As a penalty for his carelessness, he was sent off alone to forage for a fresh supply.

When he returned, Vartan put out a hand, gesturing that he would like to examine one of the roots. The cook goodnaturedly gave him one. It was as large as a small pumpkin, and as heavy as two full grown fresh coconuts. What looked like a coarse blue skin proved on inspection to be a thick, tough shell. With the aid of his clasp knife, Vartan succeeded in cutting out a small triangle. The meat of the strange nut was creamy white and of a starchy texture. Marjorie looked on in fascinated silence.

"Another botanical impossibility," she said, as he handed her a sample. She was about to taste the white meat, when one of the guards, with an exclamation of alarm, knocked it from her hand. His graphic pantomime, better than his excited protests, made it plain that the root, uncooked, was deadly poison, whatever might be its virtues when roasted.

This time the cooking proceeded without mishap. At the critical moment, the cook rolled the dozen 'potatoes' free of the hearth. Then, with hands that seemed insensible to heat, he picked them up one by one and dropped them about three feet onto the baked clay. The shells burst, and the luscious baked meat puffed out, as light as newly fallen snow.

The cook, with a grotesque show of hospitality, offered Vartan the first huge handful.

"Don't eat it!" Marjorie admonished sharply. "This may be their way of getting rid of us."

Vartan, however, did not hesitate. Accepting instantly, he stuffed his mouth with the proffered delicacy.

"Not half bad," he remarked approvingly. "A cross between fish and chicken, but a trifle too sweet." He smiled delightedly at the cook, who returned the smile, and presented him with two of the three foot balls of fluff for his own. "Never show a man that you distrust him when he makes a friendly advance," he counselled Marjorie. "Otherwise you make an enemy for life."

"But you may be poisoned," she protested.

"Not if I know anything about human nature. If this stuff is poisonous, would they need two cubic yards of it to put us out of the way? Why did that guard knock the raw piece out of your hand? See," he exclaimed triumphantly, "the cook is cramming the stuff into his own mouth without waiting to serve the others. I'm the guest of honor."

The guards fell to eagerly, not to say gluttonously. Half a ball apiece satisfied the prisoners, who were only too glad to donate their surplus of the cloying stuff to the insatiable cook.

Supper finished at last, Vartan put his theories of friendship to an immediate test.

"I'm going to ask the cook to fetch our packs," he announced. "He will."

Vartan was not deceived in his estimate of the cook's good nature. The ungainly fellow followed with the closest attention what Vartan expressed quite easily in dumb show. After a few words with his companions, who seemed to assent, he clumped off alone in the direction of the river. Twenty minutes later he was back, accompanied by the muscular cyclops, who unconcernedly carried the three packs about his massive neck. Having deposited his cargo on the hard clay by the fire, the cyclops made off straight for the river, his head turned at right angles to his body, to give him the full advantage of his misplaced eye in the dark.

On inspecting the packs, the three found that nothing had been touched. Again Vartan and Marjorie experienced a chill of apprehension. So much care bespoke an iron discipline somewhere and a rigid tyrant to enforce it. While they unrolled their sleeping bags, the guard looked on in silent astonishment. When finally Vartan slipped into his, and ordered Ali and Marjorie to do likewise, silence gave way to exclamations of incredulity.

"Better sleep while you can," Vartan advised. "We may need all the wits we have tomorrow. These fellows won't dare to touch us. Goodnight."

"Goodnight," they replied, and Marjorie added that she would not sleep a wink.

"You'll sleep like a doll," he assured her, and she did. While two of the guards curled up by the fire, the third took the first watch. Waking shortly after midnight, Vartan saw the man then on duty rouse a sleeper to take his turn. Vartan closed his eyes with a smile. He was amused at what Marjorie would probably say if he

told her his true emotions at that moment. "I'm sleeping as soundly as a man who is to be hanged at sunrise," he thought, as he dropped off again into a dreamless sleep.

Whether or not the prisoners were to be executed, the guards believed in an early start. They were on their way shortly before the sun shot up behind the razor edge of the eastern wall. Somewhat dismayed, the prisoners understood now why their guards had eaten such an enormous supper. It was clear that breakfast to them was an unknown meal. As the day wore on, it appeared that lunch also was an undreamed mystery to these hairy, hulking monsters. Like healthy dogs they ate but once a day.

At first the prisoners carried their own packs. The guards seemed to doubt the etiquette of this, for they argued long among themselves, pointing frequently to the toiling prisoners who were panting to keep pace. But, concluding that as Vartan had been so concerned about his precious baggage the previous evening, the prisoners had best be left to handle it themselves, they abstained from offering assistance. After a three hours' gruelling march, however, without a single breathing spell, Marjorie and Ali began to show signs of distress. They were instantly relieved of their packs. The third guard then took charge of Vartan's, over the latter's half hearted protest.

"Hold on a minute, old fellow," Vartan said as the hulking creature swung the pack onto one shoulder, "I have an inspiration." Recovering the pack for a few moments, he extracted half a dozen cubes of condensed rations. These he shared with Marjorie and Ali, finally offering one to the guard. The latter took the proferred nourishment doubtfully, smelled it critically, and passed it to his friends for inspection. The food contained, among other ingredients, a high concentration of beef extract. The verdict of the guards was unfavorable. With obvious protestations of goodwill, they declined to sample this strange, evil smelling food. One even hinted, by unmistakable acting, that the prisoners were guilty of cannibalism.

This strange reaction to an almost universal human food, made Vartan realize with a shock one singular feature of the flowery paradise through which they were passing. Nowhere had they seen cattle of any kind; the sole vertebrate beings in the valley were human. Clouds of iridescent butterflies rose from the vast beds of exotic, lily-like flowers through which they waded knee-

deep, and myriads of beetles, of all sizes from the tiniest to great lumbering green giants the size of cucumbers, scurried away underfoot at their advance through the lush grass, but not once did they rouse so much as a field mouse. Nor at any time did they spy a bird hovering over this birds' natural heaven. The valley was civilized enough otherwise. Innumerable well built bridges over the tracery of tributaries to the main river attested the engineering skill of the inhabitants.

Marjorie also had noticed the lack of vertebrate animals. She had also observed another peculiarity of the valley which Vartan, not being a specialist in botany, had overlooked.

"Do these blue lilies strike you as strange?" she asked.

He examined them critically. "Now that you speak of it, they do seem rather fantastic. What's the matter with them?"

"I don't know exactly," she confessed. "But even an amateur could see at a glance that they are all askew botanically. Do you like them?"

"Not much," he admitted. "Still, I should, I suppose. The shade of blue is pleasing enough, and the silver edging of the petals should make this variety somewhat of a rarity, I imagine. Still, the whole effect is not what it should be."

"Repulsive?" she queried.

"Exactly. Like our guards. They are no better than bad parodies of human beings."

"Careful," she admonished, lowering her voice. "They may understand your meaning although they can't follow the words. You expressed my feelings about these lilies exactly. They are just like our poor guards—strong, vigorous flowers, but hopelessly deformed. And the same is true of every one of the hundreds of different varieties I have noticed so far. This valley," she continued with an uneasy laugh, "is like a madman's dream of a garden."

"Know enough botany to account for it?" Vartan quizzed.

"Only what I picked up in the six years I was at Brassey House, and that is hardly sufficient." Again she lowered her voice. "Send Ali ahead a bit; the guards won't object. I want to tell you something."

"Ali," Vartan called, "step out, and see how fast these fellows can go with our packs." When Ali was out of earshot, he turned to Marjorie. "Yes?"

"I meant to tell you that day when I read the last of Mr. Bras-

sey's charge to us," she began. "But somehow it didn't seem appropriate at the time, and I couldn't. You remember that all the plants grown from the seeds James Brassey sent back were sterile?"

"Certainly," Vartan asserted.

"And no doubt you were surprised," she continued. "Or if you were not, you should have been."

"Why?" he demanded.

"Because you have been trained as a paleontologist. What would you say if you found a race of animals incapable of propagating themselves?"

"That's easy. I would conclude that I hadn't discovered their method of reproducing their kind—by eggs, division, or what not. Brassey's sterile flowers didn't astonish me. His laboratory men simply failed to find the right conditions under which the seeds will be fertilized."

"They tested every conceivable guess. At least so Mr. Brassey told me. No, Mr. Vartan, the cause of that sterility lies deeper. And, seeing these acres upon acres of deformed flowers, I begin to understand what the laboratory men said. They told Mr. Brassey he was on the wrong track."

"A matter of soil?" Vartan suggested.

"Perhaps. At any rate, they declared that all of those plants grown from James Brassey's seeds were not true plants at all, as any scientific botanist understands what is meant by plants. The very structure and functions of the cells were different in several important details from those of any known plants. In some ways, they said, those barren flowers were half way between plants and animals."

"Brassey's laboratory men made a discovery like that?" Vartan asked a little skeptically. "They must have been pretty remarkable biologists."

"Please don't laugh," she begged. "I know the way I tell it makes it sound foolish, but it is the honest fact."

"I'm not laughing," he apologized. "Go ahead. What else did they find?"

"One man discovered that the coloring matter of the leaves was not chlorophyll, as it is in normal plants."

"What was it then?"

"A substance intermediate between chlorophyll and hæmoglobin."

"Between the green of leaves and the red of animal blood?" he asked incredulously.

"That is what the man said. By comparatively simple chemical treatment he was able to change the doubtful substance into either chlorophyll or hæmoglobin at will."

"So he never knew actually whether he was dealing with a a plant or an animal?"

"Although you don't believe me," she replied coldly, "I must repeat that what I tell you is a fact."

Vartan halted. "Look here, Miss Driscott," he said. "There's no sense in our falling out this late in the game. For our mutual self-preservation we've got to work together. So I shall tell you exactly what is in my mind. First, I do not doubt your facts. Until there is evidence to the contrary, I shall accept your account of the singular botany—or physiology—of those plants grown from James Brassey's sample package. Second, I do not believe that any scientist in Charles Brassey's employ ever made such a discovery as you describe."

He marched off, to overtake the guards, who were showing signs of impatience.

"You still distrust me?" she flashed.

"Only as far as I have tried to indicate plainly. Any chemist who found means of changing the coloring matter of any plant—or animal—from chlorophyll to hæmoglobin and back again at will, and by a simple method as you say he did, would broadcast his discovery in the leading chemical journals of the world. Why didn't he?"

"He was in Mr. Brassey's employ. Anything he might find would be a trade secret."

"Rot, Miss Driscott," he retorted with quiet finality. "A chemist or biologist of that calibre wouldn't be in anyone's employ for long. Such men dictate their own terms, and they do not repress scientific discoveries of the first magnitude for the good of trade."

"You are either abnormally suspicious," she flashed dangerously, "or—"

"Or what?" he encouraged when she hesitated.

"Never mind," she said, with a smile not wholly free of malice.

"Why not give me my due," he laughed, "and acknowledge that I'm not the fool you thought I was in Bombay?"

"Because," she retorted enigmatically, "you trust Ali."

Further interchange of edged pleasantries was interrupted by the simultaneous shouting of the guards. They were now within two miles of the soaring northern wall of the valley. For the past half hour they had been traversing narrow lanes between well tilled fields. As yet there was no sign of habitation, human or otherwise. From an extensive clump of what looked like bamboo about a quarter of a mile distant, four figures emerged hurriedly in answer to the guards' shouts, and hastened toward the party.

The newcomers proved to be decently clad, which was rather more than could be said for the hairy guards who had thus far conducted the prisoners. Their clothes were close fitting suits, apparently all of one piece of brightly flowered fabric, not unlike a professional acrobat's costume. Their shoes, clumsy, shapeless attempts at artistry, were of closely woven grass, patterned in three colors with leaves and simple flowers. Evidently the cult, if any, of these people was floral. To Marjorie's relief, one of the four was a woman.

The first glance showed that these clothed natives were of a far higher order of intelligence than any the party had so far seen, either as guards or working in the fields. Although far from normal according to ordinary human standards, these four, in spite of their obvious deformities, were not wholly repulsive. Vartan found himself unconsciously scrutinizing their hands. Of all eight, there was but one, the woman's left, which had four fingers and one thumb only. The hands, and possibly also the feet, seemed to be the last stronghold of the strange disorder which afflicted these unfortunate people.

With much oratory on the part of the old guard, the prisoners were transferred to the newcomers. The woman took charge of Marjorie; two of the men made themselves responsible for Ali and Vartan, while the third, with the easy strength which seemed as natural as breathing to the valley dwellers, shouldered all three packs and brought up the rear. The three of the old guard turned back, and proceeded briskly over the trail by which they had come.

"The next patrol may be real human beings, if it keeps up like this," Vartan observed. "Each is better than the one before. I wonder where they live?"

Ali answered. Pointing excitedly to the sheer wall directly in front of them, now distant about a mile, he called their attention

to a criss-cross net of narrow trails hewn in the face of the all but perpendicular cliff. What from a greater distance had appeared as the natural weathering of the precipices, now was revealed as the elaborate work of industrious human beings. Tier after tier of irregularly spaced holes, evidently the entrances to caves, pitted the face of the cliff like the precariously placed nests of swallows.

For as high as the eye could follow distinctly, the staggered trails soared dizzily up from one straggling row of pockets to the next, till it needed but a slight leap of the imagination to prolong the fading tracery clear to the snowy crests of the precipices, fourteen thousand feet or more above the valley floor.

So stunned were the three by the sheer magnitude of what they saw, that they scarcely noted when they began the ascent of one of the broader trails up the face of the cliff. The guards seemed to fear for their prisoners' safety. The woman led, guiding Marjorie by the hand; Ali followed, supported from behind by one of the men, while Vartan's guide insisted upon leading him by the hand. The man with the packs, fearful of his own unsteady balance, unslung his burdens and dragged them up after him.

The first half dozen black holes in the rock, uninhabited so far as the prisoners could discover at a hurried glance, were passed by the guides. At the eighth, larger than any of the preceding, the woman leading Marjorie halted, and called to the man with the packs for instructions or orders. They were now about three hundred feet above the floor of the valley. The sun had already sunk behind the rim of precipices, and the three prisoners were evidently at the point of exhaustion. The orders suited the common sense of the situation, and the woman led Marjorie into the cave. The others followed.

For half a mile they proceeded in total darkness. A strong odor of pitch prepared them for what was to come. Emerging at last from the black tunnel, they entered a natural cavern, low-ceilinged but apparently without limit, lit by innumerable torches of natural gas that flamed from fissures in the floor. It was not a single cave in which they found themselves, but rather an endless labyrinth of connected galleries with bewildering vistas of flaming natural torches and supporting walls or pillars of living rock in all directions, like the multiple reflections of many caverns and a thousand flaring torches in a maze of mirrors placed upright but at random in a darkened hall.

One of the men disappeared in the maze. He was gone over half an hour. During his absence not a word was spoken, either by guards or prisoners. Vartan, for once in his life, was overcome by the mere scale on which nature builds her masterpieces. Ali seemed scarcely to think at all; Marjorie was stunned into a belief that she was dreaming, or remembering a dream.

The guard returned with five men and two women, all of higher humanity than himself. Marjorie was entrusted to the two women, and led off behind a convenient pillar. One of the new men took charge of the packs, and at once began a systematic, impersonal inspection of their contents. The old guard, the three men and the one woman, departed by the same tunnel as that by which they had come. Before Vartan realized what was happening to him, two of the men were stripping his clothes off as neatly as they might have husked a cob of corn. Ali was faring no better; indeed he was already stripped, save for the precious trinket tied about his middle by a stout cord.

Vartan found himself staring in amazed unbelief at Ali's naked body. It was as white as his own. No Indian ever had a skin like Ali's. Almost refusing to believe his own eyes, Vartan followed every movement of the men searching Ali. The trinket around his waist seemed to arouse their suspicions, if not their hostility. They were no fools; a man does not carry a tiny glass bottle filled with black dust around his waist, where only an efficient police officer would think of looking for it, unless it be precious.

"Who the devil are you?" Vartan shouted at the quaking Ali. "And what do you mean by stealing Shane's black ice?"

Before Ali could explain or lie himself out of his predicament, the suspicious guards hustled him out of sight and hearing down a corridor of the flaming maze.

"Miss Driscott!" Vartan cried at the top of his lungs, "Miss Driscott! Don't trust Ali. He's white! He stole Shane's black ice, and he has the dried sediment of it on him now in a bottle."

"I hear you," came a clear voice from behind a nearby pillar. "They found nothing on me. Did I tell you to trust Ali?"

"Rub it in," he replied. "I deserve it. But who is Ali?"

"How should I know? If they shave him and wash the stain off his face I may recognize him. If I do, I'll tell you—provided

we ever see each other again. Tell me honestly, do you think we are in danger?"

"Why should we be?" he temporized. "Our only crime was to enter their valley without a passport. They can only send us back. These people are civilized."

"You haven't answered me."

"I know. But—"

His explanation remained unfinished. The guards hustled him off by the way the unfortunate Ali had gone.

15

THE RIVER

EXHAUSTED BY THE STRENUOUS PHYSICAL LABOR of the past three days, Vartan deferred further speculation on Ali's identity and probable guilt, and made up his mind to sleep. His bed invited slumber; the drowsy rustle of innumerable jets flaming in adjacent corridors, mile after mile into the depths of the mountain barrier, was as sleep-compelling as the gentle pulse of the surf on an all but level strand. The cave in which he slept was dark, save for the dim, flickering glow from one of the perpetual torches reflected against the pillar in front of the entrance. The whole floor was a luxurious bed. Petals of aromatic flowers and the tender young leaves of spicy shrubs had been dried and tossed knee deep onto the bare rock. Although the alert guard, sombrely outlined in the throbbing glow at the cavern's entrance, was a sufficient reminder that the fragrant room was nothing but a prison cell, Vartan refused to worry. All his mature life as an explorer he had taken his troubles one at a time as he met them.

So soundly did he sleep that only the guard's persistent shaking woke him. It was time to worry about Marjorie and Ali. As the guard led him out into the full glare of the main corridor, Vartan let out a lusty shout.

"Where are you?"

"Here," a multiplied reply echoed from pillar to pillar in answer to his own. It was Marjorie's voice. Ali either had not heard, or the guards had removed him to some distant part of the caves

for safe keeping. He alone seemed to have excited the suspicions of the guards at the inspection; doubtless they had hustled him off to headquarters to interview their chief of police and head customs officers.

Vartan's own guard carried the prisoner's clothes over his arm. At an inquiring gesture from Vartan, the clothes were surrendered without hesitation, and the guard enjoyed a treat watching what to him was an unnecessarily complicated ceremony as Vartan dressed. Having finished his toilet, Vartan shouted again, holding up two fingers. The guard understood. Shaking his head vigorously, he held up one finger. Ali evidently was not within hearing. The guard motioned Vartan down a long corridor to the left, brilliantly lighted by a double row of the white flame jets. From the regular spacing of these torches, Vartan inferred that some at least were artificial, having been made by drilling the rock floor to reach the reservoir of natural gas beneath. This guess was confirmed by the lighting of the impressive hall they now entered.

"You are late for breakfast," a pleasant voice greeted them as they entered. Somewhat startled, Vartan wheeled round to find Marjorie waiting for him with her woman attendant—or jailer. "We're still alive," she continued lightly. "I half expected to wake up in another world. Didn't you find your bed as stupefying as an opium den?"

"I've never been in one," Vartan laughed. "But now that you mention it, I do remember sleeping as I never slept in my life. These people seem to know all about plants, even if they are not highly civilized. Hullo, is this our breakfast coming?"

A young girl entered the lofty hall from a gallery on the opposite side, almost staggering under a huge wicker tray piled with fruits, vegetables and leaves of all imaginable sizes, shapes and colors. The dining hall, roughly elliptical in shape, was lighted by five dazzling white jets, each twice the height of a tall man, in the centre of the bare stone floor. Around the walls, thirty to forty feet from the blazing jets, tussocks of fragrant dried grasses, each capable of seating five guests comfortably, provided both tables and chairs for the banqueters. Motioning their charges to be seated on one of these, the two guards relieved the girl of her tray, and deposited it, fruit, vegetables and all, at the feet of the prisoners.

"Do we have to eat all that?" Marjorie asked in dismay. "Where do we begin?"

"Try one of these striped red and yellow pickle things," he suggested, offering her an unwholesome looking fruit like an overgrown slug. To his surprise, the man guard, who had been watching him curiously, snatched it from his hand. "Indigestible, eh?" Vartan commented. "You show us what is fit to eat," he suggested, pointing to the luscious pyramid before them.

The man understood at once. Exchanging a few words with the woman in charge of Marjorie, he began methodically sorting out the fruits, two of each, into two parallel rows. Then, indicating the right end for beginning the sequence, he invited them to eat. It was a complicated ritual, that breakfast. A single taste from each specimen only, even of the smallest, was permitted, and after each teasing bite the guests were made to wipe their fingers on two or three of the leaves. No leaf was used twice.

"Etiquette was never like this in our Four Hundred," Vartan remarked. "Perhaps it isn't all as silly as it seems."

"You mean they know what is good for us?"

"Exactly. If an Eskimo offers you rancid blubber, throw away your canned lobster and eat it. I always live on what the natives of a country eat. These people seem to know their business."

"And I thought we should never be able to put away the tenth of all this. Now I begin to doubt whether we shall have enough."

"We will," he assured her with conviction. "That last mouthful tasted like dried Chinese eggs."

When the last fruit had been sampled, the guests were satisfied, neither more nor less. The guards gathered up the nibbled remains, swept the napkin leaves onto the pile and threw the lot into one of the flaming jets.

"Housekeeping reduced to its lowest terms," Marjorie remarked admiringly. "If it were all as simple as that, I shouldn't mind doing it myself—for a month."

"You would stick for about one day," Vartan retorted drily, "after the life you've led."

"What sort of life?" she teased.

"Catching spies for Brassey. By the way, who and what is our absent friend Ali?"

"I haven't the slightest idea," she asserted.

"On your word of honor?"

"Is it necessary?" she countered.

"Perhaps not. You suspected him on general principles?"

"More or less. If you had worked for Brassey House six years, as I have, you might begin to have a feeling for rogues when you see them. Ali was too efficient and altogether too guileless to be what he pretended. Do you remember how I walked constantly with him when we started? I was trying to make him talk his native language. But he was too wily. He never got excited enough to forget his assumed accent. Whoever he may be, Ali is almost an expert. Not quite, however. Reticence is not a characteristic of a true oriental. They may be dignified and reserved, but they are not 'close' in the same way that an intelligent, highly trained white man is. From the day we left Srinagar, I suspected Ali of being European, or at most Anglo Indian. I'd give a good deal to know what they are doing to him now."

"So would I. Hullo! What's become of our guards?"

"We seem to be left to ourselves. Shall we explore?"

"We must," he asserted emphatically, "if we are not to end our days here. Come on."

The guards had not forgotten them. Outside the breakfast hall, they found two men and two women whom they had not seen before, patiently waiting in the main corridor. With an inquiring glance, Vartan suggested that he and Marjorie would like to return for a spell to daylight. The guards stood motionless. Taking their inaction as consent, Vartan strode off in the general direction of the exit. Marjorie caught up and kept step.

"Walk off as if we were perfectly free," he advised, "and see what happens."

The guards watched them curiously for a few seconds before following. No attempt was made to halt the prisoners or to interfere with their movements. Keeping about twenty yards behind their charges, the four followed in silence. And so it went all morning. The guards followed with only an occasional word between themselves, watching every step the prisoners took.

"I don't like this," Vartan muttered, when it became plain that the guards had been ordered merely to observe. "They are trying to size us up. Why?"

"Perhaps they have been told to see that we don't run into danger," Marjorie suggested cheerfully. "Why worry?"

"You're right; I shan't. Let us enjoy it while we can still see."

"What do you mean?" she asked in sudden alarm.

"I was thinking of James Brassey," he replied gravely. "Was his resignation from the world—to put it so—voluntary, do you suppose?"

"James was mad."

"Of course, provided he let himself be immured. But if he was buried alive against his will, the whole story is different."

"I see," she said uneasily. "This must be the place he found. The *delphinium Brasseii* growing by the river is almost proof by itself. And I haven't told you," she continued, "that I recognized at least fifty varieties of those deformed flowers we saw yesterday as the same, or at least very similar to some of those grown from James' barren seeds. All the descriptions have been kept, and Mr. Brassey had carefully colored photographs of all that flowered."

"You haven't seen living representatives of all of Brassey's flowers?" Vartan interrupted.

"Not nearly all. But to go back to James. If he was not mad, why did he send back that package of seeds?"

"To me it is quite simple if he was sane, and totally incomprehensible if he was not. Why should a madman, about to shut himself away forever from the world and all its alleged vanities, think at the last moment of the honor of his family? James sent back those seeds to benefit Brassey House, didn't he? If he was as far gone as Charles believes he was, James would have been thinking of Nirvana, not of flowers and the prosperity of Brassey House."

"It doesn't follow," she objected, "that James would have sent back the seeds if he had been sane."

"Doesn't it? I'm inclined to believe it does. Those seeds, smuggled out somehow, were James' message that he was a prisoner here, and an appeal to his brother to come and rescue him. What better clue to his whereabouts could he have given? Probably he himself did not know where he was; all this region is unexplored. He did know, however, that the numerous seed collecting expeditions sent out by Brassey House would follow up every hint of the strange plants reared from his seeds. There must be an easier way into this valley; native travellers must have taken the easy way from time to time, and some of them must have spread tales and rumors of what they found. My guess is that James came to grief in tracing some of these rumors too successfully. What

was he doing during those years in the mountains when the India secret police lost all track of him?"

"I don't know," she confessed. "Your theory may be logical, but it falls with its weakest prop. Look at those four following us like trained bloodhounds and watching every move we make. Have we been left to ourselves for a single second? We have not. Nor was poor James, I suspect. It would have been sheerly impossible for him to bribe anyone to smuggle a message—seeds or other—out of these caves. Besides, if it had been possible, why should he have concealed the fact that he was a prisoner? His letter contained no hint of such a thing."

"His letter might have been read."

"By whom?"

"If native travellers have penetrated to this valley," Vartan persisted, "it is quite possible that some of them came from Northern India and knew English. I stick to my theory: James was a prisoner, and sent back that queer letter with his seeds as the only safe means of communicating with his brother."

They had reached the exit of the main tunnel, and were standing on a high narrow ledge overlooking the whole vast expanse of the valley, misty as a milk opal in the early morning sun. Only the gleaming river, meandering toward the precipices three miles to their right, gave any hint of the coming flood of light which presently would quicken the mists into transparent azure, revealing every detail to the farthest wall in iridescent splendor.

"Let us go down," he suggested, "and explore the river."

"I'm willing," she agreed, "provided our guards make no objection."

They boldly descended the narrow trail on the face of the cliff to the valley, followed closely by the guards who, however, made no effort to hinder them. At the base of the cliff they turned to the right and made directly for the river, skirting along the base of the sheer rock wall. Presently their progress was blocked by a deep ravine, evidently the ancient bed of a tributary which had long ceased to flow. Looking up, they saw the worn rocks where an old cataract had once foamed down to feed the dead stream. After their descent to the valley, the ravine offered no serious difficulties to their skill, and they were soon scrambling down, the guards following resolutely but with obvious trepidation.

"As I anticipated," Vartan remarked, kicking free a roundish

object that resembled a large ostrich egg, "the valley floor is nothing but a vast fossil bed of extraordinary richness, thinly covered with loose dirt. That was a stone egg I just sent skipping to the bottom. Look at these bones sticking out everywhere from the conglomerate. If we were to explore throughly what we can see from here, I'll wager we should find the remains of at least a thousand distinct prehistoric animals—birds, reptiles, and mammals, and nine tenths of them new to science. Look at this one, for instance."

He held up a fragment of hard sandstone from which a small white hemisphere, criss-crossed by a beautifully intricate pattern of delicate sutures, protruded in pathetic memory of the tiny animal whose brain case it had been millions of years ago.

"Is that new?" she asked.

"Partly. I believe it belonged to one of the earliest known mammals. But, like everything else in this valley, it misses being what it was intended to be by a wide margin. These sutures are all wrong. It is as great a freak as—"

"One of our guides?" she suggested in a low tone.

"Precisely," he replied, glancing up at the hands of the man nearest him. "These people are as human as we are, and yet not one of them is normal according to our standards. I'm wondering," he continued, kicking out another fossil, "whether there is anything human in those caves corresponding to this specimen."

Marjorie fingered the curiously misshapen bone wonderingly.

"Is this one really new?"

"Quite, so far as I know, and I have made old bones my life work for longer than I care to recall. That is another skull, as you can see. Fortunately the top part of it is exposed. Notice anything peculiar?"

"Are those holes its eye sockets?"

"Yes. All eight of them. The beast, whatever it was when alive, must have been the size of a small cat. If I could find the rest of it, I might be able to tell you whether it was a mammal or a reptile. But as its legs and backbone may be miles from here, I shall have to make a wild guess." He struck the specimen a sharp blow with a heavier fragment, expertly breaking off the tip of the rock. "There," he exclaimed, indicating a row of needlelike teeth embedded in the stone, "reptilian beyond a doubt. It must have been a pleasant, lively creature, with eight eyes to see its prey and

this young forest of fangs to poison it. No known member of the extinct reptiles had more than two fully developed eyes on the outside of its head. This, as I said, is brand new."

"Not like our guides, then?"

"Biologically different. This reptile is the sort of animal that might have been evolved from the known prehistoric reptiles if evolution, millions and millions of years ago, had turned just a step or two to the right or left, instead of keeping to the path it actually took."

"That would account for my deformed flowers," she mused.

"But they are still living and growing. All these seemingly impossible animals must have perished long before human beings came on the scene."

"Then what did you mean," she asked, "by alluding to human beings like these possibly being in the caves?"

"My preposterous hypothesis," he laughed. "I'll tell you about it some time."

"You might tell me now," she begged.

"Too soon—I may be all wrong. However, what I meant was this—roughly. Obviously our human friends here are only minor indiscretions of Mother Nature's. She has sported with them, but not to the shocking extent that she did with these vast beds of dead and forgotten reptiles. Now, what I should like to know is just how far she has gone with the human beings. Are those we have seen—our shaggy friend the cyclops, for instance—the worst she can do? If not, where do they hide the others? They must be pretty bad if they are too ugly for our first jailers to view with comfort."

"As bad, relatively, as those horrible blue lillies?"

"Worse, probably. After all, a plant is only a plant, but a product of human evolution gone mad might be the very devil."

"Are you sure a plant can not be worse than the devil?" she asked with a mocking smile.

He regarded her intently.

"Look here, Miss Driscott," he said coolly, "I believe you know more than you tell. And I have felt that way for some time. What is it?"

"You are not very free with your own guesses," she retorted.

"I did share one," he protested.

"Then I'll pay you back," she smiled. "Your impossible

reptiles and mammals of millions of years ago, and my unspeakably atrocious lilies of yesterday, are different aspects of one and the same thing. Or, if you prefer, they are two effects from a common cause. In the case of your fascinating reptiles, the cause worked itself out—or almost—long before the monkeys arrived. Perhaps the cause was more active, stronger, if you like, when it first began operating. As your geologic ages slipped by, the weakened effect could no longer do its worst on animals. It was still strong enough, I suspect, to attack the weaker cells of plants without killing them, but with full force—comparatively. What we see now is the last dying warmth of a great and evil fire."

He stared at her in astonishment.

"Where did you get all those ideas?" he demanded.

"Out of my head, of course," she replied lightly.

"Yes, but who put them there in the first place?"

"That would be telling," she laughed. "Just credit them to my lively imagination. I worked at Brassey House for six years," she continued seriously, "and I was not utterly stupid when I began. If you had listened to as many wild theories as I have about the origin of James Brassey's seeds, all put forward with the utmost sobriety by conservative plant pathologists, you would consider your own hypothesis too tame to be respectable."

"You have guessed it?"

"No," she smiled. "I didn't have to guess. You told me all about it in spite of yourself."

"Well I'm—," he began.

"No, you're not—yet. But you will be by your brother geologists when you publish your first paper on your theory. I know, because I've seen how these cold, critical scientists enjoy a row. Shall we go on? It's a long way to the river."

"I can only follow you," he said, not wholly in jest. "After showing me up over that miserable old scoundrel Ali Baba, and then worming my most precious thoughts out of me without my knowledge, you should take charge of the expedition."

"How do you know I'm not in charge?" she quizzed. "You do what I wish so beautifully."

"Well, if that isn't the limit." He paused, struck by a new thought. "I believe you *are* the leader," he said slowly. "Didn't Brassey engage you to run Shane and me?"

"No," she smiled.

Vartan momentarily lost his temper, and his red hair bristled ominously.

"Then who the devil did?" he snapped.

"My conscience," she answered sweetly. "You seemed so helpless. Some might say it was the mother that is in every woman that made me follow you when you tried to run away alone like a naughty little boy."

"Mother—," Vartan exploded, and scrambled up the precipitous fossil bank to the opposite lip of the ravine.

"Miss Driscott," he heaved when she, having taken an easier way up, joined him sound of wind and limb, "I admit that you put it all over me about Ali Baba. But I won't stand for you considering yourself my nurse on that account." Her amused smile irritated him to the point of exasperation. "I have a good mind to tell you now why I let you come."

"Do," she said evenly. "You promised to tell me the day we reach civilization again—if we ever do," she concluded quietly.

"If we ever do," he echoed. "Beginning to doubt, eh?"

"Yes. And so are you. James did not return."

"Sit down," he said curtly, setting the example. "Now," he continued, "I intend to have this out. From the moment I set eyes on you in Bombay, I have known—known, mind you, not merely guessed—that you are not what you profess to be. You are something more."

Her eyes followed his slightest movements with rigid attention.

"Go on," she said in a low voice.

"Whether that something more is good or bad for your employer, I have not yet been able to decide. To give Mr. Brassey the benefit of my doubt, and to earn the very generous salary he is paying Shane and me, I have played safe."

"By suspecting me of working against him?"

"If you must have it, yes. That is why I ordered you to come with me, instead of returning to Srinagar with the porters. Your eagerness to go on with me, combined with what I already knew of you from a single, revealing flash of your face as it really is, amounted almost to a proof of guilt. You are not here with me for Mr. Brassey's good."

"I am," she asserted.

"So you say," he scoffed. "Well, we shall see."

"If we live to see anything but this hideous prison with its

deformed flowers and monstrous human beings. Oh, I hate its beauty," she burst out. "Every color of those terrible rock walls is evil. The very sunlight is tainted."

"An appropriate setting for tainted truth. What I tell you now is a hundred per cent sound. You are here with me because I hoped to catch you redhanded. At first I thought it would be safer to send you back to Srinagar, instead of trying to match my wits against yours. Then I decided to take you along, and keep an eye on your doings. Your chances of escape are slimmer this way. If you succeed in robbing me," he concluded viciously through his clenched teeth, "after I've found what Brassey wants, you will deserve to go scott free. I'm not the fool you seem to think me."

"You are not foolish," she answered dispassionately, as if she were discussing an absent acquaintance. "Merely over suspicious. And," she went on, "a little upset. Now, please don't think I'm trying to mother you, because I'm not. My nerves are all on edge too. We are both as mad as we were in that terrible valley of the hot springs. Don't you realize that your brain is not working right? I do, and yet I can't make myself think clearly. We're slowly being poisoned."

"But these people?" he muttered, indicating the observant guards. "They seem sober enough."

"Why not? They are immune to whatever it may be that's affecting us. Only those with the power of resistance survived, until generations of madness or early death weeded out all but the hardiest. If we don't escape soon we shall join the weeds."

"Cheerful prospect," he mumbled, getting to his feet. "Come on. You're right, as usual. I'm going to see that river if I die in my tracks getting there."

The walk to the river was accomplished in oppressive silence. Both were exhausted when they reached the high bank overlooking the black, flashing waters. Vartan made his way down to a narrow, sandy beach. He was parched with thirst, and so was Marjorie.

"Have a drink?" he invited.

She nodded and followed him down. The four guards stood on the bank watching them intently, but not interfering. Vartan knelt down to skim the oil off a pool and drink. Instantly all four guards scrambled down the bank, shouting and waving their arms.

"Don't drink!" Marjorie cried. "This must be as poisonous as the spring water."

"Of course," he muttered in a daze, rising to his feet. "This river is fed partly by the water from those hot springs, and there must be others like them above some of the falls we saw."

"Does it strike you," she asked, "that we have not had a drop of water since we entered this horrible place? What do these people drink?"

A guard answered in the most practical manner possible. Leading her up the bank, he guided her to a dense thicket of low growing shrubs, with massive, twisted limbs and a profusion of small red berries clustered thickly about the hard, thorny twigs. Plucking a handful, he ate them, to show her that they were not poisonous. Following his example, she found the berries tasteless but thirst quenching.

"Better than iced tea," she called to Vartan. "Why don't you have some? Where are you?"

She turned to see him standing with his back to her, staring speechless at a vast blue arch in the mountain side. In their toiling walk along the base of the precipices, they had not seen this huge mouth devouring the swift, black waters of the river, nor had they distinguished its misty azure from that of the afternoon shadows on their approach to the cliffs. Hastily plucking a hatful of the red berries, she hurried to join him.

"Eat these," she said. "Then we shall go on. I think you will find what you want, if it exists, beyond that arch."

"What do you mean?"

"Nature's sport. This river is the cause of it all."

"You're wrong," he said, leading the way to the arch. "The river is only a symptom. The cause lies deeper. My fossils are ages older than the river."

"And my flowers are the same age. Are the guards still following?"

He glanced back. "Yes, but they seem to be having a debate about letting us go on. One is running back, probably for orders."

"At last," she sighed.

"What do you mean?"

"Isn't it significant that they should be in doubt? They didn't expect us to come here, and their tyrant's orders don't cover emergencies. We shall see what they wish to hide before they can stop us."

He followed in silence for some moments. "Miss Driscott,"

he said finally, "I wonder if you ever learned anything from anyone by asking a direct question?"

"Not often."

"Where did you pick up the trick of reading thoughts from actions instead of words?"

"Brassey House. I was there six years," she reminded him.

"And before that?"

"I worked for my father."

"What was he, if I may ask?"

"A great amateur. A botanist. That's why I was appointed at Brassey House."

"I see," he said, silently reflecting on her singular choice of words. One is not usually "appointed" to a confidential secretaryship. Was it a deliberate false slip of the tongue, committed in cold blood to mystify him? Or was she taking him into her guarded confidence? Baffled, he concentrated on the immediate task before him.

"Step out," he ordered. "We have practically the whole day before us, but I don't want to spend all of it in that black hole ahead of us."

"Nor do I. Do you see how it begins to glow as we come into the shadow?"

"Like moist phosphorus. Come on. It may make us pretty sick, but we must see all the sights of this enchanted valley."

THE PIT

"HOW BLACK THE RIVER IS," MARJORIE EXCLAIMED, as they passed swiftly under the soaring arch. The swirling waters lapped the rock ledge along which they hastened, with a thick, oily slap, and the broad expanse of the river, a full quarter of a mile from bank to bank as it rushed under the mountains, was as black as polished ebony.

"Oil," Vartan explained briefly. "The whole valley oozes oil. There must be huge domes of it pocketed behind those three mile precipices. Look here," he indicated a wet black stain on the smooth wall they were passing, "another leak. I shouldn't care to throw a burning match into that river. Our guards don't seem to like this enormous tunnel. Perhaps they are afraid of a possible explosion and fire."

"I think not," she replied. "They are still howling at the entrance for us to come back. Evidently this is forbidden ground. I hope," she began, and hesitated.

"What?" Vartan encouraged.

"That this underground waterway is a secret path to the forbidden garden."

"Forbidden garden?" he echoed in bewilderment. "Where did you ever hear of such a place?"

"Nowhere. I just imagined that such a garden must exist somewhere in this horrible valley where no tree or shrub is right and every flower is deformed. You remarked how those unfortunate human beings improved steadily as we approached the caves

in the cliff. The most hideously misformed were two days' journey from the comfortable, well lighted caves, far enough away never to be seen by those living in the metropolis of this diseased civilization. Do you know what I think?"

"The cyclops and those other wretched fellows were banished?" Vartan suggested.

"Exactly. You are a paleontologist—used to reading the lives of whole teeming populations of animals, that perished millions of years ago, from the orderly records of their fossilized remains. Do you ever, in all that sublime history, find a discordant note that jars your faith in the even unfolding of a great race, from its first feeble beginnings to its strong maturity and last, its natural, pitiable old age? In all your study of the past life of this planet, have you once found an absolute contradiction of regular evolution?"

"Scores of them," Vartan replied promptly. "In this black tunnel, where no orthodox paleontologist is likely to jump on my neck, I don't mind confessing that two men, Grimsby and myself, have examined hundreds of fossil remains that contradict all your old fashioned theories of slow, continuous evolution flatly. That, Miss Driscott, is why I accepted Mr. Brassey's suspiciously generous offer to head an expedition to this part of Asia.

"The specimens brought back by Marsden and Enright from our Central Asia expedition were so revolutionary, so sensational, if you like, that Grimsby refused to permit any account of them to be published. Until the origin of those contradictory fossils is cleared up, the Geological Exploration Society of America will keep them under lock and key. Only in the past two years have we got a reasonable clue. That was the origin of my 'preposterous hypothesis', as Grimsby calls it. Only when the physicists began in their laboratories to approach the most intense radiations observed in nature, was there a reasonable prospect of creating predictable forms of life—within certain limits. Nature has done it, repeatedly. Now man stands a chance of duplicating nature. I guess that what nature had done, is capable of explaining those families of contradictory fossils found by our expedition. And I further believe that your insane lilies will yield to the same rational, perfectly natural explanation."

"Even my forbidden garden?" she hinted significantly.

"Yes, if I guess correctly what you mean. You believe, do you

not, that the worst deformities among the flowers are not permitted to flourish where they can be seen?"

" 'Believe' is too mild," Marjorie asserted with conviction. "I know it."

"But how?" he asked in amazement. "You were never here before."

"My father was a great amateur botanist, as I told you, and I have inherited his instinct for what is true in plants. Those deformities growing by the acre in the sunshine of the valley are only a few of the many thousands of species that should be there. Not by any scheme of evolution, not even by your wildest dream, could the gaps in the series be explained. There are plants growing out there which must have been separated in their origins by ages of your geologic time. Where are the missing links?"

"Probably with the reptile-mammals between my little eight-eyed monster and the first human beings—dead and fossilized millions of years ago. Only the intermediate weeds have survived."

"But it contradicts all evolution," she protested.

"What of it? About twenty years ago, Muller, pottering with an X-ray tube and some insignificant vinegar flies did better than that. He did not contradict evolution, he improved on it—radically."

"How?" she demanded.

"Watch your step! You were nearly into the oil then. No more argument now; we've got to apply the law of self-preservation to ourselves."

The vast tunnel arching over the river had taken a sudden turn to the right. The last of the faint daylight, glimmering after them from the distant arch, faded, and they groped their hazardous way in total darkness. Only the feel of the wall and the oily lapping of the swift water at their left, guided them through the pitchy air, heavy with the fumes of slowly evaporating oil.

"I'd strike a match if—"

"Don't!" she cried, before he could finish. "This air must be as explosive as gas."

"I won't," he promised. "It may not be necessary. Do you notice anything? On your left?"

"Is it only my imagination, or does the water seem to shine?"

"Yellowish white, isn't it, but very faint? You get it too?"

"It is like the luminous paint on the dial of a watch, only much dimmer."

"Exactly. I suspect it will brighten considerably as we go on. There's something better than luminous paint in the rock bottom of this river bed. My hypothesis begins to be proved. Look!"

The tunnel had again turned, and for nearly a mile bored straight as a stretched string into the rock core of the mountains. Barely luminous at the point where they stood, the surface of the water increased rapidly in smoky brilliance as the river rushed into the distance, until at the limit, where the tunnel swerved again to the right, the lofty vault above the waters was as softly bright as the dawn of a summer day. They hastened on through the growing light till, rounding the blue-black buttress which marked the last bend, they saw the flaming end of the river, but not the hidden sea into which it plunged.

At first they had eyes only for the vaulted ceiling of the stupendous chamber at whose portal they stood silent, stunned and amazed. A full thousand feet above them soared the flaming spans of jagged rock, arched over the glowing bowl three miles or more in diameter, into which the river rushed. This was no work of any puny race of men. The vaulted ceiling was not carved smooth to any petty design of interlacing arches. Rough hewn, as when nature finished it, the vast dome above them shone like a bed of colossal white embers, fanned by an eddying wind that made no sound, revealing with every passing second new and unpredictable patterns of light in the transient intricacies of its infinitely various design. All the pictures of the ages, nature's masterpieces, flashed out on those living rocks instinct with light, to vanish like the irrevocable memories of a dream before the mind recorded them and the eye tired of their dynamic beauty.

The man and woman watching the cold white flames on that seemingly infinite dome of fire were dwarfed in space and time. Their own ambitions, the very aspirations of their whole race, ceased to exist. What were they, and of what value were their hopes and fears, in that icy furnace of almost intolerable light, which had burned, as fiercely as it now burned, ages before the last of the great reptiles left its futile armor to fossilize in the mud, and the first feeble mammals scurried through the marshes, free at last of their tyrannous rulers? What were their human values

worth in such a light? Nothing, perhaps less than nothing, they felt.

That fiery ceiling, still flaming out the all but inexhaustible life of the slowly dying atoms in its rich elements, would continue to burn, ever more slowly to its final, black extinction, for ages after the last human being had joined the noble reptiles in oblivion. Only an egoist imbecile would affirm that the mind, the human mind, because of its crawling evolution to an understanding of its imminent annihilation, can rise above the unliving things which shall outlast it in the semblance of life.

The man, knowing that his species must cease to be ages before the last explosive atom should disintegrate and cease to emit light, leaving only a pretty ring in the lifeless rock, wondered whether his knowledge and the long effort of his race to attain it through tens of centuries of cold and hunger, bigotry and oppression, partial success and complete failure, were worth its bitter cost. And here, he reflected, was a sufficient supply of radioactive ores for the manufacture of a limitless supply of atomic bombs. Either for that, or for the longest step forward the human race had yet taken. Which should it be? The man gave it up. The woman, enslaved to a human ideal of loyalty, of which nature knows nothing and cares less, marvelled that she should ever have devoted her life to what, until she entered the flaming chamber, she had considered her natural, human duty. Even while she wondered, she knew that the revelation was not for her, and that the vista of timeless eternity which she had glimpsed must dissolve, as it always does, in a mirage of urgent trivialities. Like the man standing silent at her side she realized, but more overwhelmingly than he, that brute humanity must triumph, and cold, impersonal nature be defeated as long as there are human senses and human greeds to be fed. Unashamed, she admitted to herself that all of what she saw was of less value than the happiness of a single human being. If necessary to maintain that happiness, all of this might ruthlessly be destroyed. Her eyes wandered from the coruscating dome to the vast funnel shaped bowl which was the floor of the tunnel.

Although the rock sides of the funnel also emitted light, it was at first not evident. The greater glare from the dome, where the main deposit of radioactive minerals seemed to be lodged, dimmed the fainter glow on the floor. As their eyes became accustomed to the lesser light, details of the natural wonder beneath

them emerged, one by one, till all fused into a single miracle of design.

At their left the river, black as pitch, shot swirling into the chamber, impinged with all its force on the lip of the funnel a hundred yards from where they stood and, impelled by its own momentum, followed the almost horizontal channel which it had cut in the living rock, half way round the cavern. Fragments of the ceiling, jostling at random on the gently sloping surface of the funnel, determined the further course of the jet when its initial force was all but spent. Diametrically opposite them, and all of three miles away, the circling river first began to spiral down the funnel. For thousands and tens of thousands of years it had hurled its massive waters at the casual barriers in its natural path, gradually grooving out the quickest descent down the arched funnel, cutting its deep channel deeper and ever deeper into the living rock as one temporary obstruction after another blocked its descent for a century of two, until finally, overcoming the last, it had found its deep spiral way down the funnel, to vanish in one last leap to the ultimate depths.

Only the faint rumor of that last, invisible plunge haunted the air of the cavern. The mighty volume of the river found its outlets from the mountain barriers so far beneath the flaming dome, that only the confused echo of its fall vibrated on the air in a dull thunder that was felt rather than heard. Yet now and then, coming and going like the rhythmic surge of the wind in a forest of pines, they heard the echo of a clearer sound, as of innumerable rivers meeting, and mingling in one concerted surge to the freedom of illimitable deserts.

To see, to the scientific mind, is to speculate in the hope of explaining. Vartan became scientific. The naive side of his nature was glutted by what his physical eye had seen; the sophisticated half of him fretted for an explanation which would tabulate the sublimity before him as but another of nature's commonplaces. His own preposterous hypothesis had prepared his mind to appreciate what he now saw.

Radioactive minerals of some sort, and in large deposits, he had expected to find in the vicinity of his and Grimsby's unexplained fossil beds. The white spot on his map of the Marsden and Enright expedition was not far from the place where the "suppressed" fossils had been found. But, as Marjorie had sus-

pected, and he had acknowledged, the whole valley with its fourteen thousand foot precipices, was a totally unexpected discovery. Following the natural extensions of the contours on Marsden and Enright's map, Vartan had expected to walk down a gentle slope to the desert where the explorers had found their sensational fossil beds. Instead, he had found a jumping off place nearly three miles high. The explanation had flashed into his mind the first time the valley glowed out beneath his wondering eyes. But, until he stood in the chamber of the white fire, marvelling like any novice, he had not dared credit his simple explanation, even to himself.

One does not find splintered holes in the armor of a battleship, unless, in general, it has been struck by an explosive shell. Nor does one find tremendous non-volcanic craters on the surface of the earth, like the famous one in Utah, unless the earth has been hit by a high-powered projectile from space. The so-called craters on the moon, or at least some of them, fifty miles across, are presumably the shell holes of bombardments from outer space by sizeable meteors or small planets, or even vagrants from far beyond the solar system.

The earth's protective atmosphere blankets it from the great majority of the random missiles it encounters, but a massive projectile, like the ancient one that struck Utah head-on, or the more recent visitor that grazed Siberia a glancing blow that was felt for a hundred miles, occasionally breaks through before it is burned up in dust and vapor. The almost circular ellipse of the valley, its perpendicular walls, and the utter unexpectedness of an apparent crater in such a locality, plainly indicated a celestial shell hole and marked, as on an artillery map, the almost vertical trajectory of the huge projectile shot at our earth from beyond the solar system. A mere planetoid of such size could hardly have interfered at such an angle with our earth, a member of the same solar system. Therefore, Vartan concluded, the great shell had struck the earth practically head-on, and it had come from the depths of interstellar space.

There was no tradition of such a shot in the folklore of any of the races of Central Asia. The geological evidence seemed to place it just prior to the epoch in which the crusted sediments were elevated into the Himalaya and Karakorum ranges. The great shell, possibly sixty or seventy miles in diameter, had crashed into

the crust, to bury itself miles below the surface of the earth. As the mountains were thrust up, the hole, narrowed, of course, was thrust up too, like a pore in the skin of a squeezed orange. This made the valley in the spot where the unfinished map said no valley should exist.

In its shattering smash into the earth's tough armor, the huge shell splintered. Fragments of it penetrated the crust as the main mass burrowed its way to rest. Encountering strata of varying densities, the splinters zig-zagged till their momentum was spent, raising minor furrows, cutting sharp gashes, or boring crooked tunnels in the resistant rock. One of these was the river's channel; the funnel, no doubt, marked the deflected course of the splinter. Another, perhaps, was the desolate rock valley of the hot springs. The main mass of the projectile, as highly radioactive as the splinter which had bored the tunnel and blasted out the chamber of the funnel, had doubtless drilled its way clear through the outer crust of the earth to the pliant basalt beneath. For ages this huge mass of highly radioactive minerals had been discharging its penetrating rays into the miles of rock, earth and tainted atmosphere above it, changing the normal course of evolution for all living things in its vicinity—plants, animals and human beings.

"Shall we follow the spiral of the river and see what is at the bottom of that funnel?" Vartan suggested.

Marjorie nodded. "We had better hurry before the guards report our escape. This is evidently forbidden ground for at least some of the cave dwellers."

"But not for all of them," Vartan added. "Look, over there to the left, about a quarter way round the rim of the funnel. Do you see something moving on the rock?"

She peered through the phosphorescent haze to the spot he indicated.

"There are several dark objects like sleeping walruses or lumps of black rock," she said. "But I don't see any of them moving. Yes, I do," she cried. "Watch the one lowest down."

For a moment they stood stock still, silently debating whether to continue their rash enterprise. The slowly moving lump of black life, lumbering its awkward way down the arched slope of the funnel, even at the distance of a quarter of a mile, had a strangely sinister appearance. Vartan, recovering first, marched rapidly forward to take his chance. After a moment's hesitation, Marjorie

followed. Twenty yards from the knot of black lumps they stopped.

There were eight of the slow-moving, lethargic creatures sprawled over the luminous rocks. One had already disappeared over the curve of the funnel. Each was the size of a large cow. The bodies of all, prostrate on the rocks, were mere bags of flesh contained in leathery black hides, like the sacks of enormous octopi. Their tough skins gleamed in the fierce light from above, as if all had been drenched in crude oil. Creeping a few steps closer, Vartan saw that it was not oil which smeared their bodies, but a coating of gelatinous black slime. All seemed to be completely exhausted, and indeed at the point of death.

"What are they?" Marjorie whispered, joining Vartan.

"Heavens only knows," he replied in an undertone. "Degenerates of some ghastly sort, I suspect. Mutations, if you prefer."

"Mutations of what?"

"That's the question. Are those twisted things branching from their bodies legs or arms? Or are they tentacles?"

"How could they be legs and arms? The one nearest us has twenty."

"Five sprouting from each stub where an arm or leg should be. Fingers and toes. The next one has twenty four, like some of those freaks we saw in the valley. This is the same sort of degeneracy gone several steps farther."

"Are they human?" she whispered in alarm.

"Why not? You can do worse things than this, comparatively, to insects and frogs by breeding them properly under the right dosage of rays. Here nature does the breeding and the dosing. These things were probably born in this pit, like their ancestors for hundreds of generations. I wonder if they can see or hear?"

Picking up a large fragment of luminous rock, he dashed it with all of his strength on the floor directly in front of the nearest lump's rudimentary face. The rock burst into a hundred pieces in a shower of brilliant sparks. The black lump of living matter took no notice. It neither saw the sudden light nor heard the crash within a foot of its face. The elliptical sockets in its shapeless face were without eyes, and the bare holes on the sides of its head were not ears.

A sharp splinter of rock had inflicted a slight gash near one of its front nostrils—a mere hole flush with the front of its face above the slit which was its mouth. A thick, purplish ooze,

exuding from the gash, crept slowly down toward the thin, straight upper lip. The creature seemed to feel no pain; Vartan doubted whether it knew that it had been slightly wounded. At length, however, the sharp stimulus registered on the lump's rudimentary nervous system. A knot of its tentacles unwound clumsily, slowly groping for the place of pain. Unable to find it, the five supple fingers, like enormous black kelps, gave up the difficult quest and sprawled helplessly over the stone floor. The purplish ooze had reached the more sensitive nerves of the upper lip. A thick tongue like a cow's was lazily protruded to lick up the unexpected food. For the first time the inert monstrosity showed evidence of at least the beginnings of intelligence. Blood was not its proper food. It spat vigorously, and one long black tentacle moved, almost swiftly, to wipe the offensive matter off the lolling tongue.

"A vegetarian," Vartan observed. "Like those more human guides in the valley. Do you remember how they refused the condensed soup cube I offered them?"

"Don't," she begged. "I can't bear to think that these poor creatures are human beings like ourselves."

"Not like us," he corrected. "Like what our offspring may become, or like what our race may evolve into. I'm serious. I have seen just as repulsive monstrosities, hundreds of them, bred in a bottle. Only they were flies. That these are human doesn't make them any worse, intrinsically."

"But they are so utterly hideous! They have no minds."

"What of it? Neither have we, in the sense you mean. Try to explain thought, or consciousness, or any of the other so-called higher faculties, and see where you land. Who *has* explained them? Nobody. All of our mental processes are nothing more, in the last analysis, than fairly complicated elaborations of that dumb human brute's behavioristic reaction to the unsavory blood on its tongue. When I, or any other scientific men, elaborate a theory, I am merely cleaning my tongue. If evolution continues to go in the way it is headed now, a million years hence all of our art, literature and science—provided the record of any of it survives—will seem like just so many inefficient attempts of mindless animals trying to rid themselves of irritant, mechanical stimuli. In kind we are exactly like those black lumps. We differ only in degree. You are

shocked, because they are several hundred steps, and not merely a yard or two, in advance of us.

"To me they are less repulsive than that bundle of human offal you told me to look at in the gutter in Bombay. It still had reason, and refused to follow the natural life for things having what we call reason. These have outgrown even the remotest parody of intellect. They live the perfect, unemotional life of pure instinct. I do not find them half so tragic as those mutated butterflies and beetles we found by the hot spring. Those were neither one thing nor the other. They had just started toward the next main plateau in their evolution back to unliving matter; these things have almost reached it, as our descendants may some day—unless we learn how to control mutations at will, and not merely to observe the unforeseen results of our blundering experiments."

"But those butterflies and beetles were beautiful," she protested.

"To you, yes. How would one of these lumps of protoplasm react to your conventional beauty? Ah," he broke off, "now we shall see them feed."

Dragging itself by its tentacles, one of the black lumps had moved slowly over toward its nearest neighbor. When the pair were all but touching, they began to feed, simultaneously. The twenty long tentacles of one began laboriously swabbing the black jelly off the other's back, and it, more efficiently endowed for the great end of self preservation, deployed all twenty eight of its boneless fingers and toes on the first feeder's body. Their clumsy efforts to lick the black jelly off their blundering tentacles made the process of obtaining sufficient nourishment for their bulky bodies long and perplexing. Over half of what was scooped off was wasted, and lay unregarded on the luminous floor. These creatures had one, and but one, set of fixed habits. Necessity for the slightest variation from these might well result in their extinction by starvation in the midst of plenty.

At last one was as clean of the black jelly as its brainless consort could make it. For several minutes it lay motionless, digesting, and slowly realizing that the fingers of its mate had ceased their caresses. Presently the black bag felt that it was no longer being loved. With a sickening attempt to be human, or even apelike, it endeavored to raise its belly off the stone floor by extending its stiffened tentacles. Then it tried to crawl. Its ancestors having lost the art of walking, even on all fours, hundreds of

generations ago, the creature's instinctive attempt ended in a slapping collapse which belched the breath from its sagging body.

Having failed to respond to an all but eradicated instinct, it answered mechanically to the unintended stimulus of its fall. Slowly it began dragging itself by its tentacles, like a half-dead octopus, to the lip of the funnel. It was going down again, in its blundering, natural way, like a primitive miner descending his pit, to wallow in the mire which supplied its food. Vartan followed it; Marjorie, overcome by the spectacle of the feeding, which had nauseated her, stood where she was.

The lump descended rapidly, clinging to the rough slope with its weaving tentacles.

"Come on," Vartan cried. "I'm going to see where it collects its food."

"Don't," Marjorie protested feebly. Nevertheless she followed.

The creature's intention soon became clear. It was heading, as straight as it could, for the first groove of the spiral in which the river raced down the funnel. Reaching it, the blundering mass at first tried to cross up over the rim of the groove. Five tentacles dangled to the black surface of the rushing water; one dipped, and was brushed sharply forward. The stimulus, evidently a familiar one, was recorded by the rudimentary nervous system. The creature lumbered away from the impassable barrier, and began feeling its way down the surface of the funnel, following the descending spiral of the river. Anticipating its objective, they hurried ahead of it, picking their perilous way through the misty light in an effort to reach the bottom of the pit.

As they descended, the funnel narrowed rapidly, and the spiral swept ever more steeply downward. Its initial complete circuit around the funnel was all of eight miles in circumference. By taking a steeper descent, they reached the second, half a mile vertically below the first, in a diagonal drift of only two or three miles.

After five hours' breathless scrambling, they found themselves circling the fifteenth turn of the spiral. The diameter of the funnel at this point had narrowed to less than half a mile, and the thunder of the fall, far below them, began to resolve itself into more than a distant, drumming echo.

"We shall have to stay here all night," Marjorie panted.

"Tomorrow too, probably," Vartan added cheerfully. "Come

on. The light seems to be dying out of these rocks as we get down. Look out; here's a slippery bit."

Several times in their descent they had crossed smooth trails worn into the living rock by the passage of innumerable crawling bodies, ascending and descending the pit in search of food through countless generations. Some were little better than precipitous slides. Twice they had paused to observe the slow ascent of the human monsters, their bodies glistening with a thin paste of hard, black jelly, laboriously pulling and squeezing themselves up the smooth trails by their tentacles, the natural limbs for such a climb.

"I believe that horrible black stuff is growing on their bodies," Marjorie observed on one of these occasions. "The paste or jelly on those we saw first was at least two inches thick. This is a mere skin." Boldly approaching the creature, she examined the slimy substance.

"What do you make of it?" Vartan asked.

"I can't see properly in this light. But it looks like a paste of algæ full of tiny black seeds or spores."

"Like the seeds James Brassey sent back?"

"Possibly. Would it be safe to strike a match?"

"It might, but I don't like to take the chance. The air is still rank with evaporated oil from the river."

"Never mind. We may strike a pocket of better light presently. Have you noticed a brightening of the rocks now and then?"

"Yes," he said. "Every once in a while we pass an outcrop of more highly radioactive material. Shall we go on?"

They continued, for seven hours in all, till the funnel narrowed to considerably less than a quarter of a mile in diameter. Their hope was gratified. For the past hour the phosphorescent glow had steadily brightened. Fissures in the side of the funnel, some dangerously near the spiral trough of the river, glowed like the interior of a white hot blast furnace.

"This must be where at least part of that splinter lodged," Vartan remarked.

"Which splinter?"

"The one from the projectile that bored out this funnel after splitting in two and leaving half of itself to form the dome of the main chamber. Probably this whole surface is studded with deeply buried chunks of the other half. What is that over there? The entrance to another chamber of light, or just an extra bright crack?"

"It must be something unusual," she replied. "See how all the stone trails converge toward the entrance. We can stay there tonight."

"I suppose we shall have to. It will take us at least twelve hours to climb out of this."

Vartan's guess proved right. They were about to enter the glowing cavern, when two of the slimy black monsters lumbered out on their way to the top. He stood watching them curiously. The hard, black jelly on their bodies was but little thicker than a good double coat of paint. Evidently it had just been applied. They were going up to the main chamber of radioactive light, possibly, to let their food grow and ripen on their bodies.

They entered the chamber. Roughly it resembled the first which they had seen, but it was on a much larger scale. The rushing of the river in its rocky groove was clearly audible as they passed under the lofty arch of the entrance.

"In another thousand or two years," Vartan remarked, "the roof will cave in. Then our human squids will be washed out for good. Do you see anything particular?"

"Is that a marsh over there to the right? The light is much dimmer in here than it was in the upper chamber."

Walking over to the supposed marsh, they had an uneasy feeling that they were not alone. Vartan expressed the opinion that their guards had returned to headquarters to report, and the proper police had hurried down, through safer channels, in the heart of the rock, to recapture them. The floor of the vast, dimly lit cavern was plentifully strewn with enormous fragments of rock behind which an observer might easily secrete himself to see without being seen. Presently Vartan gripped Marjorie's arm and dragged her behind a convenient rock.

"I heard footsteps. Human, normal steps. They've come for us."

The steps passed their hiding place less than twenty feet away. Peering out they saw a man, deformed, but not excessively so, making his way through the misty light toward the marsh. Over his shoulder he carried a long wooden blade, not unlike an oar. He seemed intent upon his own business. Curious to see what he was doing, they stole after him, flitting from the shelter of one rock to the next.

The "marsh" proved to be a wallow, miles in extent, of what looked like black mud. Around its margin, hundreds of the human

octopi sprawled in clusters of inert stupidity. Approaching one school of the brainless monsters, the man with the wooden blade examined the dozen or so brutes critically for a few moments. Then, having satisfied himself that most were useless to him, he began slapping their black hides vigorously with his blade in an effort to rouse them into motion. Some, after many attempts, he succeeded in starting on their way toward the exit by which Vartan and Marjorie had entered; others he belabored till they wallowed far out into the shallow black mud. There remained but one to which he had not attended. Using his blade as a swab, he carefully scraped off every particle of the black slime which he could reach conveniently, wiping off what he collected with his foot. Having accumulated a sizable pile of the quivering stuff, which he seemed to consider precious, he prodded the quiescent brute into the slough.

"What on earth does he want that stuff for?" Vartan whispered.

"Seeds. The right, rare kind. Seeds from the depths of interstellar space,"a voice behind him replied, and burst into a maniacal laugh. "Seeds of madness. They are very rare."

They wheeled round to see who had spoken. For once in his life Vartan felt a chill of fear over his whole body as he stared into the eyes of the suave maniac confronting them.

"May I ask," the man continued calmly, and in a well modulated voice, "what you are doing in my garden without my permission?"

THE LIBERATOR

ANNIBALE ZANETTI AND HIS MASTERS HAD AGREED on Constantinople as the safest meeting place in case of important developments. Neither European nor Asiatic in character, although readily accessible from both Europe and Asia, the city with its fluctuating population of cosmopolites was an ideal rendezvous for statesmen or others who might wish to be inconspicuous. Zanetti, who looked more like a corpse than a living man, was taken for a persistent invalid with a grave affection of the heart, vainly pursuing health; his masters, for outlandish new-rich tourists. Their race unlike the baffling Zanetti's was hardly a matter of doubt. Still, as all races met and mingled freely in this cosmopolitan city, their presence aroused no curiosity, either in the minds of the Turks or in those of the numerous sightseers of all nations, including their own.

It was considered rather strange by some that the aged invalid should seem to derive pleasure from sitting at the cafe tables with these outlandish visitors whose French was so bad, for a strange friendship apparently had sprung up between them and him. They made no attempt at concealment, confident that their association would be construed, as indeed it was, at its obvious and false face value as a lapse of taste on the part of the aged and ailing Zanetti. Their garrulous lack of reserve in public was their best alibi, should one ever become desirable.

The business for which they had met was not discussed at cafe

tables, but in the early hours of the morning in Zanetti's sickroom. Propped up on the pillows, his face like a waxen death's head, the old man would discourse for an hour at a time in a voice scarcely above a whisper, while his intent listeners, never interrupting by word or gesture, strained every nerve to follow what he was saying.

"Death is not far away," he began one morning. "I have finished my work, and I am ready to go. Now that it is all so nearly over, it seems small and trivial."

A murmur of dissent broke the thread of his thoughts. Seeing their mistake, his listeners became instantly silent, waiting for him to continue.

"Turn out all the lights but one," he resumed, "and raise the shade of the East window. Thank you. Now I shall see the sun rise, and perhaps catch one last glimpse, far beyond your vision, of our beloved country.

"We are by nature a peace loving people. Once we were great. War, unsought and unprovoked by us, was our ruin. Under the rule of our oppressors we have been powerless to throw off the yoke of virtual slavery. Their weapons, by which they held us in abject subjection, were inaccessible to us. I sought others, to render theirs as obsolete as were the lances and sabres of our glorious defenders who opposed their muskets and cannon. I am about to put into your hands the key to true freedom for our injured people and destruction for those who enslaved us. At last our great Society of the Liberators shall justify its name."

Noticing a shadow of doubt on the faces of some of his listeners, Zanetti roused himself to speak with great passion and obvious effort.

"I read your minds," he resumed, his voice harsh with scorn. "For you, our people are about to win their freedom from their oppressors, if indeed they have not already won it, without a blow being struck by the Liberators or by any human being but the oppressors themselves. I have implied that we are still oppressed. This, you, who have never felt the iron heel of arrogance grinding into your human dignity, have never felt. But the mark of the heel is sunk deeply into your minds. Some of you have the slave mentality—you, whose forefathers were free men and civilized human beings, when the oppressors were barbarians. The mark must be erased, or your descendants will be slaves for generation after generation, and our race rots. Slaves in the body?

No; slaves in the mind, meekly obeying the dictates of the oppressors who are relinquishing their material grip on us, only the more firmly to govern our thoughts—our souls, if you still prefer that language. Freedom of the body without freedom of the mind is slavery. As long as the oppressors have the power and the will to dominate our minds—which they have—we shall not be free. Our ways of thought are not, by nature, theirs, and never were. We must return to our own spiritual homeland. But we cannot while the oppressors live to think, to reason consistently, and to infect our minds with a sanity which to us is a form of madness. All of this must be destroyed once and forever. With their insane wars, especially the last two, among themselves, our enemies have weakened themselves in the material world to the verge of exhaustion. So they plan graciously to grant us our freedom when they no longer have the material strength to enslave us. They hope that we ultimately will become as they, for the greater glory of their inhuman minds. Those minds must be conquered. In overcoming them, once and for all, we shall have discharged the debt of hatred our people have owed these aliens in body and mind for centuries. Is this revenge? Perhaps. I prefer to think of it as justice. Make your own judgment. Call my attack revenge or justice as you prefer, but do not sit down to decay in the sloth of a false freedom. Complete and lasting victory is in our hands. We must grasp it firmly, and without compassion. We have suffered too long and too much."

The effort of his exhortation left the old man gasping. He tried to control himself. Something in the smug faces of three of his younger listeners made control difficult. Would these inheritors of an old struggle that had at last been won by default on the material side, have the willpower to win the greater struggle he had tried to make them comprehend? He doubted.

"You young members of our Society were born long after I had reached maturity," he resumed. "I am older than your fathers, most of whom have been dead for many years. I sometimes wonder," he continued after a reflective pause, "whether the young Liberators have the courage of their fathers. Will they, when the hour comes to strike, remember, as we did, the indignities that had been heaped upon us?" Suddenly he sat up, his eyes blazing. "If when the time comes you turn aside for reasons of what our

enemies call 'humanity', may you—" He did not finish, conscious in his cold, scientific mind that all curses are fantastic.

"Let that go," he panted. "To understand me, you must now learn something of my life. Then perhaps you, whose blood is undefiled, will see why I have labored all my life for one end as you have not.

"My blood is not pure, as yours is. My father was of the enemy. Only my mother was worthy to put blood in my viens. I am not alone in my disgrace. Many of our people have tainted blood. Temporary unions, forgotten as soon as the father returns to his own country, are common among our people. Some even are proud of their mongrel lineage. I am not, and I never was. My father, to his credit if any is due, saw that I was properly educated and that my material needs were supplied for life by a modest but sufficient income. I was sent to Europe, to the best schools and universities of France, Germany and Italy to develop my scientific talents, which revealed themselves at a very early age.

"The first stages of my education completed, and one or two investigations of merit already to may account, I returned to my native country. My intention was to organize relief, in the way of adequate education for those who, like myself, were of tainted lineage. My own father was the exception. Too often the illegitimate offspring of those mixed unions were left in squalor to shift for themselves, outcasts alike from masters and slaves. Before a year had passed I realized that my project was impracticable. Those whom I would help either had no spirit or they had too much. The first were beaten before the battle started; the others never knew when they were defeated beyond hope.

"Despairing of ever helping my people directly, I pondered on indirect means. In my darkest hour I found the light. Certain high members of the Society of Liberators cautiously approached me with veiled hints which one of my intelligence could not fail to understand. In a flash I saw my opportunity. The secrets and aspirations of the Liberators were divulged to me without reserve, and I dedicated my life to their service.

"Ours, as you know, is a wealthy organization. It is, as some might say, colossally rich. The accumulated hoards of at least a dozen princes of our blood, slowly amassed for twenty or thirty centuries, are at the disposal of the Liberators. When first I joined the Society, many of our members were planning to use all this

inordinate wealth to accomplish their end directly, by corruption of the dominant leaders among our oppressors so that they, sold out to us, should influence their avaricious countrymen to let us redeem ourselves. The Society planned, in short, to buy freedom for our people by offering the oppressors a hoard that would glut even them. Our country, as you know, has been, for centuries, the bottomless sink into which finally all the gold of the world drains, to be buried unproductively in trinkets and miserly hoards of useless wealth. In their innocence, I say, the Liberators dreamed of purchasing freedom. Rome, I reminded them, had failed to bribe the vandals. The scheme was abandoned.

"Another faction proposed that we use our vast wealth to perfect such a military machine as this world had not yet known. On its face this scheme was wildly futile. Great military despotisms cannot be created in secret. Our oppressors were armed and watchful. We could not have begun the creation of an efficient army. Finally, I pointed out, our race had not then, if it ever had, a genius for war.

"Unable to attack either by bribery or the sword, what remained? When all else fails, question nature. Sudden victory was not for us with any weapons we could then command. To attack in our own country was out of the question. What, in all the arsenals of nature, would be an effective weapon to destroy our enemies in their own country? The problem was not an impossible one. Patience and talent, I knew, would ultimately solve it and give us our freedom.

"I returned to Europe to resume my scientific investigations. It was in chemistry that I first sought the key to liberty. Five years of incessant labor gave me much. The most precious of all my gains from those five laborious years was personal. They taught me that I was not a great chemist. Once, and only once, was I tempted to persevere in one possible attack suggested by all that barren search. My critical judgment, however, perfected by arduous years of scientific discipline, warned me that poison gases were not, and never could be, the key to military or national supremecy. They maim, disable and kill, but they do not destroy an enemy. The proper weapons for combatting that form of attack are too readily devised, and the conflict ends with honors even, neither side destroyed.

"My greatest discovery of those five years, I said, was that

I was not a chemist of the first rank. Was I of sufficient mentality to be first in any science? As a student, I had been drawn most strongly to biology—the study of life. Living things, I dared to hope, were my true field. I resumed my biological researches where I had abandoned them five years before. This time I attacked my problems with a new strength, for my understanding of chemistry put a hitherto untried weapon into my patient hands.

"Do you imagine I was wasting precious years while our people were still enslaved? Was I merely playing with the pretty things of nature—flowers and butterflies—while the oppressor's hold tightened about our throat? If so, you are deluded. To accomplish a task of the magnitude I had set myself takes more time than to build a city or an army. When I began, I was prepared to face failure on my deathbed, and to pass on to others of our Society what little I might have accomplished.

"I did not work at random. From the first the grand outlines of my campaign were clearly before my eyes. Two principles of victory have guided all my attacks.

"First, there is no partial success. To be victorious, a conqueror must defeat his enemies once and for all. The enemy that is left with a chance, however slight, of further attack, however futile, is not defeated. Victory, in this sense, must be complete.

"Second, it is impossible, by any known means of attack, to achieve complete victory as I have defined it in my first principle. New assaults must be devised.

"With these principles before me, I critically studied the causes of failure of all known methods of warfare. What have these in common that invariably renders them futile in the end? The answer is so obvious that few will ever dream what it is. All attacks have failed, I say, because they seek to destroy the enemy *from without*. To abolish a nation or a race, it must be attacked *from within*.

"I do not refer, of course, to the crude device of fomenting revolutions and counter-revolutions, such as was employed in both World Wars. These are merely variants of the attack from without. What I have in mind is more radical, slower of attainment, and lasting. Once my attack has been launched, there is no answer possible.

"In essence, the ideal attack is simple. What I have called the attack from without has as its objectives the destruction of life

and property. Complete victory, in my sense, is unattainable by the attack from without, because it is impossible, for financial and humanitarian reasons among others, ever to destroy the last life and the last remnants of wealth of a beleaguered nation. The attack from within overcomes these fatal disadvantages in the following way.

"Life without reason and intelligence is not life as human beings know it. Property without intellect to imagine it and to conserve the gains created by organized imagination, is impossible. Deprive animals of their minds—their faculties of reason and intelligence—and they become so much vegetation, slowly stagnating to sterility and death.

"The essence of my attack from within is the destruction, not of the enemy's life and property, but of his reason. That accomplished, the enemy will himself, in four generations at the most, annihilate himself and all of his possessions. As a human race he will cease to exist. The means for such an attack are within your reach.

"Whether, on grounds of our common humanity, which we share with our enemies as well as with our friends, you will refuse to employ this, I do not venture to predict. Years ago, when I was about the age of the oldest of you, I myself would have hesitated. And here, on my deathbed, I again might hold back. For, facing the light as I do now, I see that life is greater than any man or any race of men. Are we sinning against life in destroying its highest manifestation—reason—in millions of our fellow men? I shall leave that decision with you.

"If I am not mistaken, you will reach a high plateau in your lives, midway between old age and death, when your feeling for humanity will atrophy, and you will see only the ancient wrongs of our people, and their spiritual freedom as the only things that justify your life and give it meaning. That is the hour to strike. Delay, and the shadow of death will make you merciful.

"The weapon I offer you is irresistible. By destroying the minds of our oppressors and of all their race, I do not mean that they will be driven to violent madness. Their decay will be mild, a form of heritable imbecility rather than an explosion of insanity that would serve but to make its victims dangerous to the whole world and in particular to us. Their taint will render them incapable of constructive reason and of ordinary human living.

Under its influence, transmitted infallibly from father to daughter and from mother to son, they will cease to exist as human beings within four generations. To every enemy, even the weakest and least efficient, they will be as helpless as idiots. It will, however, be unnecessary to attack them, in the old way. They will slowly extinguish themselves. Their bodies, accustomed by slow centuries of evolution to the necessities of life as human beings know them, will waste away as those necessities are no longer supplied.

"To provide the means of human livelihood, human reason is necessary. Without nurses and attendants, the inmates of our asylums for the insane would starve to death in a month. By the end of the fourth generation, the native countries of our oppressors will be madhouses in which all are patients and in which there are neither keepers nor nurses. Their unreasoning attempts to help themselves will but hasten the inevitable end. Then our minds shall be free.

"This is not a sick man's dream, impossible of fulfilment. That the simple means for achieving my purpose are available, I know. When first I turned to serious biological study as my life work, I had only faith. Now I have knowledge. If nature, I argued, has evolved human reason, the natural means of reversing the process must be within our reach. For every living thing carries with it the seeds of its death. The evolution of reason is not yet perfected. Otherwise not one imbecile would be born in any generation, and no living man or woman would ever lose his or her mind. That was my first clue.

"I was seeking, as you have guessed, destruction of the mind on a wholesale, racial scale. The problem should be less difficult than it seems at first. The constantly increasing numbers of imbeciles and insane in our civilized societies are unmistakable evidence that evolution has not yet triumphed, and that our reasoning, thinking race is constantly in danger of slipping back to the unreasoning, mechanical brutes from which it has started to evolve. How increase the number of reversions to the mindless stuff from which we sprang? The balance between evolution forward and retrogression was so delicate, so slightly in favor of ever higher intelligence, that it should not be difficult, I argued, to destroy the balance and reverse the ratio of ascent to one of descent. For ten years I devoted my life, drawing on the practically limitless

resources of our Society, to a minute historical study of insanity in all of its forms.

"This work, locked away in our archives, anticipates most of the modern studies by the statisticians of insanity, and much that is unknown to them. I was seeking, let me remind you, clues to at least one form of heritable insanity. Unbalanced minds resulting from injury or the accidents of disease were of no importance for my purpose. Such were mere casualties of nature's war from without. I sought the secret of her attack from within against human reason. Therefore I instructed my searchers and historians —who never dreamed the true object of their work—to prepare exact and detailed histories of all cases of inherited madness or insanity which they found in their researches.

"Two cases of supreme importance emerged early from this exhaustive study. Remember, I beg of you, that in all of this the highest skills of spies and of scientifically trained searchers were at my disposal. If but a single fact was lacking in a particular case, I counted ten thousand pounds a trifling expenditure to obtain it, either by the patient search of semi-public records or by the slow corruption of servants or dependents to whom private family histories were accessible. In one instance my agents spent three years and twelve thousand pounds on the corruption of a private secretary. Their gain, well worth the time and money, was a five minutes' inspection of the secret records pertaining to one branch of a certain family tree. This was in fact the crucial step in my first conquest of outstanding importance.

"The two cases to which I have referred proved, as I had early guessed they might, to be different manifestation of one and the same cause. The first was a mere matter of one family only; the second concerned a numerous caste—if one can call it that—of zealots in our own country. The single family whose history I found of such importance, is one of the oldest in England, that of those Brasseys who trace their lineage back to Saxon times in England, long before the Conquest by the Normans in 1066, and who now are known all over the earth as the proprietary owners of that great scientific seed and plant establishment, Brassey House, founded in 1776.

"I need not detain you with a detailed account of the tragic history of that great House, with every aspect of which I made myself familiar nearly fifty years ago. It is sufficient to state that

their family tree is the most perfect example—scientifically it is a thing of flawless beauty—of the Mendelian laws of heritable insanity in existance. The taint entered their blood in the year 1100. The subsequent history of their family, once I had verified conclusively that its affliction was subject to an inexorable law as mathematically beautiful as that which governs the tides, did not interest me. Their tragedy, inescapable, was their own, and I could not have helped them if I would. I saw in it only the first hint of a completely victorious attack from within upon our enemies.

"The one point of supreme interest in the tragedy of the great Brassey House was, to me, its origin. On that the family history was clear as to dates and persons. The sane members of the family for generations have followed every turn of their misfortune minutely and intelligently. For at least two centuries they have been able to predict, within reasonable limits of error, the outcome in a particular generation. Only as to the origin of their misfortune were they obscure. Here, for a moment, I must digress, to make clear how I succeeded in unravelling the mystery where the historians of the Brassey family failed.

"Mendel's great discovery on the laws of heredity was published long before I began my life work in biology. It had been ignored or forgotten by any who chanced to see it, until the beginning of this century, when it was unearthed from the unimportant journal in which it had been buried for thirty five years. My expert bibliographical assistants had anticipated the official rediscovery. One of these abstracted the short paper, and laid the conclusions before me. From that moment, it became one of my chief guides in the research toward complete victory. The other, as I shall tell you presently, came nearly thirty years later.

"What uses did I make of Mendel's great discovery? Many. The one which concerns me now is the application which I early made to the Brassey family. Their insanity was as beautiful an example of Mendel's laws as any on record. I did not stop, however, with the genetics of their insanity. Remember, I was seeking to discover its cause and, if reasonably fortunate, to duplicate that cause at will. In my efforts to proceed rationally, I analysed every recorded event in the hundreds of Brassey histories preserved by their annalists, and studied minutely the rhythmic recurrences of their striking abilities. These, no less than their

insanity, followed Mendel's laws with beautiful consistency. There was, however, one difference between the law of their abilities and that of their madness which showed up as but another verification of Mendel. Whereas the rhythm of insanity entered abruptly with the initial pollution in the first year of the twelfth century, the other regularities went straight back to the earliest records, long before the taint entered their blood, or rather, I should say more exactly, before their germ cells were radically and permanently changed in such members of the family as sprang from the fatal union. After the eleventh century, the two rhythms, that of their abilities and the other of their insanity, surge on together, without mutual interference, like trains of waves on still water intersecting but maintaining their respective individualities.

"One of those rhythmic abilities—or excellences, if you like—gave me the clue. From the earliest times, occasionally skipping a generation or two, the Brassey family has reckoned among its distinguished members one or two daring adventurers, notable investigators or great explorers, in every century. The spirit of discovery, whether of unknown countries or of obscure facts of nature, is inherent in the very cells of their bodies. To one of these daring explorers the misfortune of the Brasseys is due.

"Late in the eleventh century one of these adventurous Brasseys, in a journey of exploration which was remarkable for that time, penetrated the decadent countries of the Far East, making extensive collections of seeds and animals, which he brought back with him to England. The botanical interest, you observe, was already implanted in the Brassey blood.

"More important to us, that Brassey brought back with him an Eastern bride, a girl of rare beauty and sparkling mind. She first gave evidence of insanity after the birth of her fourth child, a son, and the direct lineal ancestor of the present Charles Brassey. Medicine in those days was a tissue of harmful superstitions. The young wife was accused of being possessed by a devil which had failed to be cast out at the time of her baptism into the faith of her husband. According to the Brassey history, she denied this charge, confessing—or acknowledging—what to her was the cause of her illness. Before losing the last remnants of her intelligence, she declared that her delusions were the inevitable heritage of all her kin. They, she said, were a sacred race who, ages in the

past, had tasted 'forbidden fruit in the garden', and whose eyes, therefore, were opened to the truth. She lived long and happily in her madness, for to the insane madness is truth.

"The Brassey historians comment on this pathetic explanation with a singularly obtuse but rational gloss. The poor wife, they aver, accounted for her own sin of madness by linking it to the legend of the Garden of Eden, which her patient husband had taught her and which she, as an infidel born, was incapable of comprehending. More pertinently they preserved a careful record of her delusions with a precision remarkable for that time. The Brasseys, as I have said, are an inherently gifted family.

"Here was the clue I sought. Without difficulty my army of trained searchers uncovered the persistent legend to which the unhappy wife had referred. It is indeed a commonplace to our antiquarians, and I am sure some of you must already be familiar with it. Many of the mad fakirs who infest our villages and cities claim a lineage for their madness as honorable as that which the young Mrs. Brassey gave. They also are seers descended from an ancient line. Their apparently arrogant story places their origin also in a garden, where their remote forefathers boldly ate forbidden fruit and had their eyes opened everlastingly—for generation after generation—to the supreme truth. As in that forlorn bride's case, so in theirs; madness is truth. And why not? They live without sweating for their bread, and they dream their idle happy lives away in visions of an impossible Nirvana. Were they as other men, they would be embroiled all their lives in lies and strife.

"All this was but a clue to the weapon I sought. For all I knew, it might be generations before members of our great Society of Liberators might be able to complete my work. Nevertheless I persevered. As I have said, if that inbred, ineradicable insanity is one of nature's works, it must be possible to discover its cause, to hasten or retard it, in a word to control it and make it our slave, as our oppressors made us their slaves.

"In my scientific training, particularly in Germany, I had learned to appreciate the tremendous power of a slow, minutely organized, patient investigation which subjects all facts to the closest scrutiny, tabulates them, classifies the results, and stores them away for possible use in the final assault upon an unsolved mystery. Thus, again drawing heavily on the resources placed

without stint at my service, I organized an archæological division to unravel our tangled histories and legends, in the hope of tracing to its ultimate source, if any, the superstition of that caste of mad fakirs.

"Ten years of this work by my corps of historians and linguists yielded precisely one fact of significance. There was a legend, as they asserted, which seemed to recede into the mists of antiquity of a forbidden feast. But, and here is the significant fact: as the search receded in time, the legend slowly changed into another. The original madmen had not eaten forbidden fruit; in the early form of the legend they had entered a forbidden garden, and possibly had lived there for generations.

"Like the traditions of Eden, this legend also recorded a 'fall'. Some disaster, its precise nature unspecified, had thrust the happy madmen out of their garden. Certain fragments of the story in our oldest mythologies assert that a sudden flood, occasioned by the collapse of a mountain barrier, drowned all but a few of those in the garden, washed the others to safety, and sealed the entrance permanently against their return. In others, a circular valley, deeply hidden in all but inaccessible mountains, is described as the location of this mad paradise. Caves are mentioned in another, and in all there are echoes of a strange, cold, perpetual fire. The last seemed at the time so preposterous that I dismissed it as a myth. My arrogant skepticism may be pardoned, however, when you recall that I am speaking of a time a full quarter century before the first hint of radioactivity startled the scientific world no less than laymen. Even the X-ray, at that time, was an undreamed-of possibility.

"The net results of these researches was negative but significant. From all the evidence I concluded that such a garden as was described in the traditions had existed, and might still exist; that at least a half of the population of the valley, or garden, had suffered from hereditary insanity, and finally that the insanity was induced by certain unknown features of their natural surroundings, much as cretinism and goitre are in part due to a lack of iodine in the soil or water of some localities. There was the obvious distinction, however, that goitre is not transmitted, as was this madness, from generation to generation. Nevertheless I believed I was on the right track. I must first trace the madness of the Brasseys and of our own fakirs to its source, when I, or my suc-

cessors, could learn to induce it wholesale, hastened, possibly, in a given population.

"My next natural move was to seek to rediscover the forbidden garden of the legends. Once more our generous supporters poured out their treasure when I assured them that, for reasons which I could not divulge at the time, the proposed explorations were of the highest importance. The explorers had only the vaguest hints upon which to work. They were to look for a valley, in the mountains to the north, almost circular in shape, practically inaccessible from above, and showing evidences of some catastrophe which had flooded a part of it and cut off egress, more or less permanently, to the outside world. Under the guise of scientific explorations to aid the unselfish advancement of knowledge, we enlisted the services of some of the most daring explorers of modern times. Scientific Academies and Learned Societies were generously subsidized to undertake extensive explorations in certain regions which we specified. Their reports, unknown to them, would give me all the information needed. If they were unconsciously successful—from my point of view—trusted agents of our own could complete their work in detail with but one object before the eyes. None of these expeditions gave me anything of value.

"All this time, no matter whether one of my forays in my vast campaign proved fruitless, I worked steadily at my biology, striving to master the mystery of heredity and to direct it to my own ends. My guiding star, as I have said, was Mendel's great discovery. Yet I found nothing of fundamental importance for my project, except one dim guess. Since sunlight and the whole intricate scale of radiations composing it are necessary for plant and animal life, could it be that the secret of evolution and of heredity was bound up with that of other harder or softer radiations, unperceived by our senses and as yet undiscovered? Following this up, I had some minor successes with infra-red and ultra violet light. Then, overnight almost, in 1895, the sensation of X-rays burst upon the world. The time was propitious; in my middle forties, I was fully mature scientifically.

"I at once began experimenting with these rays on living matter. By the end of two years of incessant labor I had sufficiently perfected my technique to obtain my first definite results. Thinking that small animals would be most easily affected, I first used the

common green aphis that infests roses. I proved definitely, by hundreds of controlled experiments, that it was possible, by subjecting living aphis to X-rays, to modify permanently the structure of their germ cells, so that their offspring were new insects, different species, capable of transmitting their changed structure of eye, wing or leg indefinitely. These new insects 'bred true' for scores of generations.

"The next step was to repeat these experiments on larger insects and even on small mammals. Again I was successful. Beyond my expectations I bred mice capable of transmitting a certain important defect of the brain. Then, while these experiments were at their height, a third great discovery took the world by surprise. With the early work in radioactivity it was learned that the very atoms of which matter is made can disintegrate. I looked to the process of disintegration as a possible source of more penetrating radiations to be used in my efforts to change permanently the smallest particle of matter that can be called living. In this I had but little success.

"Accident, so called, has initiated more than one scientific discovery of the first magnitude. To those who have not made a profession of science, most discoveries seem to be made this way. The fortunate accidents happen, however, only to those who are prepared by a lifetime of hard labor to appreciate them, and whose inner eye is subconsciously peering into the future. This was the case, for example, with the X-rays and with radioactivity.

"The accident which found me prepared, and which delivered the final key to victory into my hand, was of a different kind. It was human. Certain microscopic spores collected by James Brassey contain the solution. Of this I am convinced. How I have reached this conviction is a long story, and I shall not live to tell it all to the end. I would not have told this much did I not know that I am about to die. What I have revealed is necessary for the continuance of my work and for your victory. One man only knows the continuation of what I have told you. Believe what he tells you, and act upon it according to your best judgment."

"Who is it?" one ventured to ask.

"It is both unnecessary and dangerous to him and to yourselves that you should know his name."

"But how shall we recognize him?"

"He will tell you where James Brassey's seeds were found.

Your biologists must do the rest. I have instructed them. It may take generations, but complete victory is in your hand."

"What if a spy tries to trap us? We *must* know the man's name."

"Don't argue!" Zanetti snapped, with a last flash of his old fire. "I tell you this man will offer incontrovertible evidence. Believe him. He is one of us, (although at first you may mistake him for one of the enemy) and has been for nearly twenty years. The success or failure of his present mission means complete freedom or a degrading slavery of the mind for our people. I have said enough. Is that the sun?"

"It is rising."

Annibale Zanetti sank into unconsciousness, perhaps voluntary. When his friends at last stole from the room he was dead. The autopsy assigned the cause of death as heart failure aggravated by senile decay. He himself might have said that he died of disgust.

UNMASKED

"MAY I ASK WHAT YOU ARE DOING IN MY GARDEN without my permission?" the madman repeated with a rising inflection when neither Vartan nor Marjorie replied at once.

In spite of the unkempt gray beard and matted tangle of hair, Marjorie observed a family likeness immediately. Going up to him frankly, she extended her hand as if she were greeting an acquaintance at an afternoon tea.

"How do you do, Mr. Brassey? I am your brother's confidential secretary, Marjorie Driscott. I have held the position a little over six years."

James Brassey, who might have posed for a portrait of the mad Nebuchadnezzer, eyed her with crafty hostility. Except for a filthy breech clout he was naked. His finger nails, like his hair and beard, apparently had not been trimmed for years. Combing his beard reflectively with his twisted talons, he directed his attention to Vartan.

"And who the devil may you be?" he drawled.

"My name is Vartan. I am an associate in the Geological Exploration Society of America, with headquarters in New York. At present I am on a mission for Mr. Charles Brassey who, according to Miss Driscott, is your brother."

James stopped combing his whiskers, and thoughtfully regarded his black, curling nails.

"Travelling together?" he asked pleasantly, but with an unmistakable twist.

Marjorie flushed to the roots of her hair, and Vartan's jaw set ominously.

"We are," he asserted, "but not in the way you mean. Miss Driscott is your brother Charles' confidential observer on this expedition."

"No offense, old chap. I understand perfectly. Though you might not think it," he continued with a diffident glance at the one article of clothing which he boasted, "I'm still an English gentleman. Dress for dinner every evening. You'll stay of course?"

"We shall be charmed," Marjorie accepted eagerly. If James considered himself an English gentleman, she thought it wise to treat him as one.

"Capital," James replied drily. "Because you will jolly well have to, whether you like it or not. So you are observing, are you, Miss Driscott? Noticed anything particular?"

"Your botany is rather weird."

"Ah, I see. A botanical observer. Used to do quite a bit in that line myself. By the way, did you notice any of those fat fellows on the way down here?"

"The things like squids? Yes, we saw several. Are they human?"

"Human?" Brassey repeated, lowering his voice confidentially. "As human as you are, and more human than I am. You see," he explained affably, "I have no mind. I'm mad as a hatter, or the March Hare, or whoever it was. Those black bags of jelly have minds. I'm convinced of that. They do the same thing, day after day, in the same way. Therefore they're human. Good workmen, and all that. Now I, whenever I try to do a consecutive piece of work, forget what it is all about after the first hundred years or so. Never seem to get anywhere. Although," he added with a flash of pride, "I still have my microscope. Brought it with me, you know. I can use it, too." For some moments he stood silently tugging at his beard. "Lord," he broke out inconsequentially, "I'd sell my microscope and my immortal soul for a walk down Piccadilly again, when the lights are just coming on."

"You may not need to," Marjorie suggested softly. "Why not leave this horrible place and come back with us?"

"And be locked up in Colney Hatch till death do us part? Really, Miss Driscott, I prefer my own society. I'm not quite right, you know."

"If you are not feeling well," Vartan suggested tactfully, "I know your brother Charles would think it a privilege to have you stay at his house and be taken care of till you get well."

"Charles? You don't know brother Charles as I do. He's a damned hypocrite. Pretends he isn't crazy, and all that, and made me leave England to protect himself."

"I'm sure you are mistaken," Marjorie said gently. "Your brother thinks the world of you."

"Then why doesn't he drop me a card once in a while? Christmas or New Year's would do. He hasn't answered a single one of my letters, and I'm always writing."

"Yes, he has," Vartan countered boldly. "Miss Driscott and I are Charles' answer to all of your letters. Some must have been lost in the mail."

James eyed them cunningly. His moods, they observed, were as changeable as summer winds on a lake.

"The other man is just a sort of postscript to dear Charles' letter?"

"You mean our interpreter?" Vartan asked. "I should rather call him a badly misspelled word that Charles forgot to erase."

"Not trustworthy, eh?" James remarked. "Just what I thought myself when I shaved him. Never shave myself, any more. Beastly bore, you know, when one is roughing it as I am. But I do like to see my friends as they are. That's why I still hang onto my razor, I suppose. Or perhaps," he chuckled grimly, "I shall have sense enough some day to cut my silly throat."

"You shaved our friend Ali Baba?" Vartan asked, ignoring James' cynical pleasantry.

"Why not? Didn't do it myself, of course. My servants induced him to shave. You suggested it yourself, you know. A guest's wish is his host's command. Who was it that said that? Shakespeare? Never mind. I helped your tertium quid to doff his beard."

"I see," Vartan replied. "You overheard my conversation with Miss Driscott last night before I went to bed?"

"Not at all," James retorted with dignity. "I do not spy on my guests."

"Then how did you come to think of shaving Ali Baba?"

"The servants suggested it. Highly intelligent persons, some of those servants. Learn languages as easily as breathing. To kill time I've taught some of them French, German and English. Queer

thing, isn't it, that they should speak French better than I do? They get the 'ongs' and 'oils' perfectly."

"Where is Ali now?" Marjorie ventured to inquire.

"Setting the table. Told me he had been a butler in England."

"In England?" they exclaimed together.

"Why not? He seems to have fooled you once, so why shouldn't he do it again? It's an art that becomes perfect with practice. By the way, what was he doing with that bottle of black dust tied about his waist? I threatened to shave him again myself, but he simply would not tell me. Said he realized it was all a mistake, after seeing this place, and he was thoroughly ashamed of himself. Did he steal it from one of you?"

Vartan briefly explained the circumstances. James followed with the closest attention. For the moment his flickering sanity seemed to burn steady and bright.

"Do you two know what you are trying to do?" he asked with deadly calm when Vartan finished. Before either could reply, he whipped an ancient wooden pillbox from his breech cloth, removed the cover with a flourish, and presented the box for their inspection. "Have a pinch of snuff?"

"Delighted," Vartan replied instantly, acting on his theory that all friendly advances, from savages or maniacs, should be accepted in the spirit in which they are offered. Before he could help himself to a pinch of the shiny black dust, Marjorie had dashed the box from James Brassey's hand.

"Don't!" she cried.

James picked up the empty box, put on the lid, and restored it to its hiding place. His face was white with repressed anger.

"I beg your pardon," Vartan apologized for both of them.

Ignoring the apology, James faced Marjorie with a dangerous glitter in his eyes.

"So you know what you are trying to do," he said.

Marjorie paled, but kept her wits. Now or never she must justify her employer's faith in her ability.

"I don't know what you mean," she said quietly. "Mr. Vartan is very easily upset by tobacco. Snuff, I believe, is worse than smoking. I didn't want to see him made ill just before dinner for the sake of mere politeness, and I beg your pardon for not having reminded him more tactfully."

If James swallowed this glib explanation, Vartan did not.

Marjorie knew a great deal more than she would admit. His first estimate of her was confirmed. She was acting a part. For whose good or evil she was acting remained to be seen. Whatever James may have thought, he kept to himself. Remembering that he was an English gentleman who changed his breech clout for dinner he accepted Marjorie's apology with a bow that would have been ludicrous if it had not been pathetic.

"Shall we go to dinner?" he asked. "Your things, I presume, have not come. Will you excuse me while I change?"

"Certainly," they said, and James stalked off toward a dark hole in the rock wall behind them. They waited till he had disappeared.

"Are we prisoners?" Marjorie asked.

"It seems that way," Vartan admitted. "James looks dangerous. Evidently he has made himself master of whatever society there is here. The Englishman's genius for bossing primitive peoples, again, and making them do things their native common sense tells them are absurd. Let's try to make him talk after dinner."

"I'm willing. Eat very little, and sample nothing that he doesn't touch first."

"What was that black powder?" Vartan demanded accusingly.

"I don't know, but I believe it was spores."

"Then why did you knock it out of his hand?"

"Have you ever heard of cocaine? Is that a good thing to snuff? Well, these black spores may be worse. Take a chance, if you like. I shan't. Good Heavens!" she broke off. "Keep a straight face. Here he comes."

The admonition was unnecessary so far as it concerned Vartan. If he had given any vent to his emotions, it would have been through tears, not laughter. Stalking pompously toward them with outstretched hand, James Brassey, the unconscious caricature of all that is stately and dignified in formal English Society, was offering his guests the honor of his hospitality. He was in evening dress. The swallow tail coat was a generation behind the times; only a fragment of one trouser leg clung to the thigh which had thickened considerably since James was measured for the suit, while the rags of the other flapped about the knee like a signal of distress; yet, true to his dearest tradition, he had dressed for dinner. His feet, as when they had first seen him, were bare. The white shirt, which should have set off the green-black remnants of the swallow tail,

was missing. It had rotted years ago. In its place, James' hairy, muscular chest burst through the ineffectual screen of the coat which he had long since outgrown.

"This way, Miss Driscott," he said offering her his arm. "I am sorry, Mr. Vartan, that I have no lady for you to take in this evening. If I had anticipated your delightful visit, I should have had a houseful of beautiful creatures to meet you."

"Things are fine as they are," Vartan assured him cordially.

"Your pleasure is mine," James replied courteously. "It's only a step or two. When I first began living here, I arranged the dining room at a convenient distance from my dressing chamber. One gets so warm in here in one's evening clothes. Too stuffy, don't you think? Good; so do I. Tried to find some way of ventilating the place, but never succeeded." Then, with a truly Kensington touch, he turned to Vartan and confided a domestic secret of the highest importance, in exactly the same words that his father had used hundreds of times. "The drains," he boasted, "are excellent. No thorn without its rose, eh?"

He led them into a snug, highly luminous pocket in the wall about five hundred feet from what he called his dressing room.

"Another reason," he continued, "why I put the dining room here is that I don't like passing the marsh just before dinner. I've worked in the stuff for years now, but I simply can't get used to one of those piles of black jelly just before dining. Interesting enough, too, in its own way, as I told you. Full of seeds, I think I remarked."

"You did," Marjorie confirmed. "What kind of seeds?"

"Ordinary seeds," he replied offhandedly. "Seeds of madness, I call them. Very rare. The pollen is what counts—not from those seeds of course, but from the flowers. By the way, what happened to my snuff box? Dash it!" he exclaimed irritably. "I've left it in my other clothes. Never mind. Miss Driscott, will you sit here? Mr. Vartan, on my left, please."

The incident of the pill box was already fading into the murky half lights of the shattered mind. As they took their seats they devoutly hoped it would not emerge again to embarrass them. They had expected to dine as they had breakfasted, like ancient Romans, reclining on beds of dried flowers. James however had never fancied the native customs of eating. Somehow or another he had put together a very fair table and half a dozen three-legged

stools. There was even a tablecloth, not of white linen, it is true, but of a coarsely woven fibre that looked like hemp. In the centre of the table a huge half-gourd, brimmed with impossible flowers that would have made an orthodox botanist gasp, glared at them with its crude scarlets and shrieking blues.

"From my own garden," James explained, seeing there amazement. "You don't get flowers like that in England, do you?"

Marjorie admitted their strange rarity.

"Smell one of the scarlet ones," James continued, eyeing her with ill-disguised hostility. The snuff box had flashed out of the black clouds of his memory for a moment, and almost before she replied, he had forgotten his purpose.

"Thank you," she said, with a warning glance at Vartan, "but the full fragrance of most flowers makes my head ache. They are beautiful," she exclaimed, noting the puzzled frown on his face. "If you don't mind, I'll just sit and admire them."

"They will be flattered, I'm sure," he returned with a pitiable attempt at the gallantry which he had once practised as a young man, years ago, before the hand seized him. "Where's that man?" he continued fussily. "He said dinner was served."

Hearing his new master's voice, the impeccable servitor entered from the hole in the wall which evidently was the kitchen. His clothes were Ali Baba's, but his shaved face was another's. Vartan rose slowly to his feet.

"Well, I'm damned," he said. "Shane's Old White Horse."

With an inimitable resumption of his English man servant's fawning insolence, William Arbold, late caravan leader Ali Baba, late factotum of Brassey House, obsequiously stole behind Vartan's stool.

"Will you sit down, sir? Mr. James Brassey made this stool himself. I am sure you will find it most comfortable."

"I'll see you in hell first," Vartan retorted. "Miss Driscott, do you recognize this man, or am I dreaming?"

Marjorie also had risen, and was staring in round-eyed astonishment at the former Ali Baba.

"Who are you?" she whispered in a voice not wholly free from fear.

"My name is Arbold, Miss Driscott. William Arbold. If I remember correctly, I frequently had the pleasure of seeing you during the past six years at Brassey House. You are Mr. Charles

Brassey's confidential agent, are you not? May I ask you to be seated?"

"I'll not sit down till I know the truth of this. Who are you?"

James, following the strange dialogue confusedly, also had risen.

"May I ask what this means?" he demanded. "Dinner is getting cold. Is this man your interpreter, your servant, or is he not?"

"He is not," Vartan snapped. "Do you remember Scotland Yard, Mr. Brassey?'

"A sort of police station, wasn't it, with a man called Sherlock Holmes at its head? Yes, I seem to remember something of the sort when I dropped out of things."

"You are right, essentially," Vartan replied. "The main point is that this man, who was our alleged interpreter, is badly wanted by the police of Scotland Yard right now."

"How interesting," James remarked. "You don't say? But why don't you all sit down and have some dinner? Oh, pardon me. This man is now my butler. Will you serve us, and take your own meal in the pantry?"

"Yes sir, thank you sir," the former Ali murmured in perfect imitation of a faultlessly trained servant. "I can find nothing but fruit and vegetables in the larder, sir. Shall I bring them on?"

"Of course," James replied, a trifle tartly. "What do you think you're here for?"

"Mr. Brassey," Vartan began when Ali, or Arbold as he now seemed to consider himself, had withdrawn, "I don't believe you realize how serious the situation is. This man, I tell you, is being sought by the ablest police agency in the world, and he has been posing as a native Hindoo and our interpreter."

James Brassey for a moment struggled hard to concentrate on what his guest with the sober face was trying to tell him.

"Indeed?" he said. "How extraordinary. But you are tired and hungry after your long journey, I know. We can talk after dinner. Ah, here it comes."

Vartan exchanged a despairing glance with Marjorie, while Arbold obsequiously served them with piles of unwholesome looking fruits or vegetables in gourd bowls.

"Can't you think of something to bring his mind back for half an hour?" he asked in a low tone.

"Not now," she answered, glancing at their host whose whole

attention seemed focused on the fruit before him, which he ate noisily and with a lack of manners that would have shocked himself in one of his saner moments. "Wait until after he has had his dinner." She turned to Ali, who was meekly standing at attention against the wall. For the moment James was oblivious of their presence. "William Arbold," she demanded sternly, "what are you doing here?"

Arbold glanced at James. The forlorn creature was wholly absorbed in the joy of eating a meal served by undeformed hands other than his own.

"I will tell you," Arbold replied with cold civility. "I am here, Miss Driscott, to see that you do not betray your employer, Charles Brassey. Like Mr. Vartan, I distrust you. And so does my chief, if you wish to know."

Marjorie did not flinch.

"Who is your chief?"

"Inspector Ransome, of Scotland Yard."

"You are an agent of Scotland Yard?"

"Temporarily. Loaned to London, you might say, by the India Secret Police, to work on the Brassey case."

"Does Charles Brassey know this?"

"He does not, and he wouldn't believe it if he were told. His friend Ransome put me on the case to protect Charles against himself, and to prevent him from being fleeced by every spy who worms his or her way into his confidence."

"You think I am one of those spies?" she continued quietly. "Please give our host some more fruit before you answer. Take your time."

Arbold served James a second enormous bowl, and turned to face Marjorie.

"I think," he replied slowly, "as Mr. Vartan does, that you are not what you represent yourself to be."

"Two against one," she commented. "For Mr. Vartan s good, I must warn him—"

"Never mind me," Vartan cut in curtly. "I can take care of myself. Go on, you two. You were together for six years at Brassey House. If you don't know one another by this time, even with Arbold as Ali, and with you as whatever you may be without any makeup, it's your own fault, and I can't help either of you."

Marjorie glanced at Vartan with something perilously near contempt before putting her next question to Arbold.

"Annetta West," she continued, "was also an agent of Scotland Yard, I presume? She disappeared from Brassey House the same afternoon that you did."

She had kept her eyes studiously on the scarlet and blue flowers while speaking, in an obvious effort to avoid Arbold's face. Vartan, watching both like an expert poker player, detected the slight, barely perceptible evidence of Arbold's struggle to read his inquisitor's purpose. For perhaps two seconds he hesitated before answering her question.

"Miss West," he said, "was also a trusted agent of Scotland Yard."

"I thought so," Marjorie murmured enigmatically. "Why did she send that fake cablegram to me in Bombay?"

"That Mr. Shane's slides had been found?"

"Yes. That one. Shall I recall it to you? I memorized it, for possible emergencies. The first part was uninteresting. It merely said that Mr. Shane's slides had been returned. The rest gave the message enclosed with them: 'Mr. Vartan's sealed orders are, in our opinion, of greater moment to Brassey House than are Mr. Shane's slides, important though the latter undoubtedly are. It would be to the advantage of Brassey House to learn the nature of Mr. Vartan's sealed orders before entrusting him with the proposed expedition.' Did Miss West send that message?"

"Undoubtedly, Miss Driscott," Arbold answered immediately.

"Because you told her to send it?"

"I instructed Miss West by cable to send such a message in behalf of Scotland Yard."

"You suspected me?" Vartan suggested.

"After what I gathered during your lunch at Brassey House, how could I help it, Mr. Vartan?"

"So you and Miss West have worked together," Marjorie added, "from the beginning. I see. How simple it all is when one knows. Did you at any time include me in your suspicions?"

To cover his confusion, real or assumed, Arbold offered James some dessert in the shape of smaller fruits.

"Your integrity is not questioned at Scotland Yard," Arbold explained as delicately as he could. "But we have questioned Mr. Brassey's wisdom in entrusting you with important missions."

"Such as observer on this expedition?" she suggested.

"That, specifically. Yes. Mr. Ransome thought it would be wiser to have an experienced man on the case."

"And that, I presume, is why you took charge of Mr. Shane's black ice—or rather the sediment you carefully collected from it. You thought, perhaps, that Mr. Shane might be robbed by spies on the way back to Srinagar?"

"If you were an experienced operative," Arbold retorted with a trace of asperity, "you would see that it was the only thing to be done."

"Thanks," said Vartan ironically. "You two either leave me out of your theories entirely, or seem to take it for granted that I'm a crook."

"Tit for tat," Marjorie countered with a charming smile. "Now, Mr. Arbold, you have just told me I'm stupid, so please don't object if I ask you a perfectly silly question. Are you English?'

"I am."

"Sure of that?"

"Why shouldn't I be? I knew my own father pretty well, I should think."

"How about your mother?" Marjorie persisted. "Didn't you know her even better than you knew your father?"

"Really, Miss Driscott, I don't see the drift of your questions."

"You will in a moment. Were you born in England?"

"Of course I was. What—"

"Never mind. I can't prove that you were not. Was your nurse English, Scotch, Irish, or American?"

"I had no nurse," he snapped.

"Then your mother was not English."

"I—"

"Never mind. I'll leave it to Mr. Vartan. He's impartial enough, as he doesn't seem to like me any better than he does you. Even the most skilful and highly trained man in the India Secret Service cannot deceive forty natives into believing he is one of them, for weeks on end as you did, unless he has native blood in his veins. His little tricks of eating, of walking, of speech, would give him away in less than a week to even stupid men. Our porters were not all dense. Some of them were highly intelligent.

You are so much a native in some things that you don't know it yourself.

"I conclude that your father was an English officer—perhaps a gentleman; that your mother was at least part native; that she was your nurse and constant companion for the first seven or eight years of your life; that you were 'sent home' to an English school, and did well in your studies; that you went to Cambridge or a private tutor to prepare for the examinations into the India Civil Service; that you passed high, and entered the secret service. Am I right, except perhaps for details?"

Vartan had been sitting open mouthed while Marjorie analysed the man standing stock still with expressionless face before them. He now took his part.

"Answer her yes or no. Don't hesitate! You did hesitate. You needn't bother to tell us. The answer is yes. Now, to come back to the original question, who the devil are you?"

William Arbold permitted a broad smile, almost a grin to expand over his equine features.

"It can do no harm to tell you now," he confessed. "Before I do, I must apologise to our charming observer, and admit that she has far more ability than I've thought she had all these six years. Perhaps I had better say also that from my observation of you, Mr. Vartan, I find you to be as trustworthy as Mr. Brassey could wish. The time for all my harmless little disguises is past. From now on we must all pull together. Allow me to introduce myself. I am Alfred Jamieson, Chief of the India Secret Police, loaned by the Government of India to Scotland Yard to clear up this very perplexing Brassey case."

19

GUILTY, OR NOT GUILTY?

WHAT VARTAN THOUGHT OF JAMIESON'S REVELations he kept to himself. Marjorie also remained thoughtful, as if resenting the slur cast on her perspicacity by Inspector Ransome of Scotland Yard. Could she have known the very practical estimate which Miss Annetta Tappan-West had given of Inspector Ransome, she might have felt more cheerful. For the moment she was absorbed in watching James Brassey. Being at last satisfied, James was contemplating the centrepiece of scarlet and blue flowers. His eyes were dull, as if he had overeaten, which indeed he had. Presently one black hand was thrust out over the table to reach for the flowers. Marjorie quickly intercepted his hand.

"Not now, if I were you," she counselled, as one might advise a child to let the sweets alone.

"Eh?" he stammered in a daze, aware of his guests for the first time since he had started eating. "Enjoyed your dinners? How thoughtless of me not to have seen to you. But this new man William or Charles, or whatever his name is, is excellent. Much better than the clumsy lout with four thumbs who usually serves me." His hand again wandered for the forbidden flowers, and Marjorie again restrained him. "What do you do that for?" he demanded peevishly. "Why can't I smell my own flowers?"

"Wait till later," she soothed. "We want to talk to you, Mr. Vartan, and I, and Mr. Jamieson."

"Jamieson? Who's he?"

"Chief of the India Secret Police. He has come with us to take you home to your brother Charles."

"That man? He's my butler. I think, Miss —, Miss whatever your name is, you've had too much wine. Hadn't you better lie down for half an hour? The maid will show you a room." James lapsed into happy silence, dreaming that he was at home again. Presently he remembered his brother's name. "You mentioned Charles. Damned hypocrite, Charles is. Wants to hound me out of England, because he's going insane, and is afraid I'll have him locked up."

"Tell us," she suggested softly. "We have come to help you. Believe me, I am your friend, and I'm not tipsy."

James' face brightened.

"Capital," he exclaimed rising. "Shall we adjourn to my study? I feel like talking.

Marjorie hung back and whispered to Vartan.

"After that heavy meal the blood will leave his head for an hour or two, and perhaps make him more rational."

"If he doesn't go to sleep. His mind seems to be completely gone."

"Not so far as you think. His memory is affected, but he is rational enough to keep a grip on the people of this hideous place."

"A mere subconscious trick of his British instincts," Vartan replied. "Did you ever know an Englishman who couldn't make himself boss of any 'native' population? I saw perfect idiots ruling large towns of docile miners in South America. James has the knack."

They had entered a cave rather larger than the dining room and more brilliantly lighted. On a triangular table, evidently of James' own construction, in the exact centre of the room, a microscope, dirty and green with verdigris, occupied the place of honor. Around it, in utter disorder, small piles of what looked like rich black loam, and innumerable dismembered remains of strange flowers, attested James' pathetic attempts to keep his mind alive. Around the walls, several litters of dried leaves served as chairs or lounges. Waving his guests to make themselves comfortable on these, James sat down on the stool at the table, facing them.

"Would you care to see what I have been doing recently?" he asked.

Jamieson—or Arbold—was about to accept, when Marjorie adroitly captured their host's attention.

"Let us lead up to it gradually," she suggested. "You said you have written many letters to your brother?"

"Did I? You mustn't believe everything I say, especially if I say it before dinner. But, go on. I may have written. What of it?"

"Do you remember the package of tiny spores you sent him?"

James reached for the microscope and began toying with it. His perplexed frown seemed to indicate that he dimly recalled the incident, but was not sure of himself. Marjorie followed up her advantage with a brief, clear account of Charles' attempts to locate his brother in India, of the receipt of his only letter from James, of the efforts at Brassey House to propagate the plants grown from James' seeds, and of Charles' grief over his brother's supposed voluntary, living death. As she spoke, James' face gradually lost its frown and his eyes cleared. When she finished, he looked up suddenly, sane for a moment.

"I remember writing to Charles. Are you sure I sent him a package of seeds?"

"They came with your letter."

"Then I must have done it. I have often dreamed that I did, but I can never remember for certain when I wake up. It was a hellish thing to do. I must have been out of my head."

"You deliberately tried to break your brother's heart?" Vartan suggested.

"Not at all, Mr. —. I forget your name." He addressed Marjorie. "You say Charles' men never made any of those plants produce seeds?"

"They were all barren. At Brassey House the men used all the precautions they knew or could invent to make the plants fertile. They never risked a specimen in the variable temperature of outdoors, but always raised the plants, from germination to maturity, under glass."

James looked up from the litter of dead flowers which he had been pulling to pieces.

"They grow in here like beastly toadstools," he remarked. "I'll show you after awhile. And as for the valley—that big dish you came through—they grow wild. If these very intelligent people didn't watch their p's and q's, pretty sharply, the whole

valley would be swamped, overgrown like a jungle, with the infernal things in one season."

"It must be the light," Vartan observed. "Try to bring up an animal in a greenhouse, without ever letting it outdoors, and it will collapse of rickets."

"Indeed, Mr. —? By the way, what *is* your name?"

"Vartan. I was just going to say that what you have told us proves that these plants will bear seeds only if they get full sunlight or its equivalent substitute in the radioactive emanations of these caves. Glass, of course, cuts out the ultraviolet rays of the sun. If your brother had grown his seeds outdoors, they might have developed into fruitful plants."

"Thank you, Mr. Vartan. I seem to remember having heard something about ultraviolet lamps for bathrooms just before I left England. Now, Miss Driscott, you said some of the seeds had probably been stolen. Did you ever hear of any of them maturing and bearing seeds?"

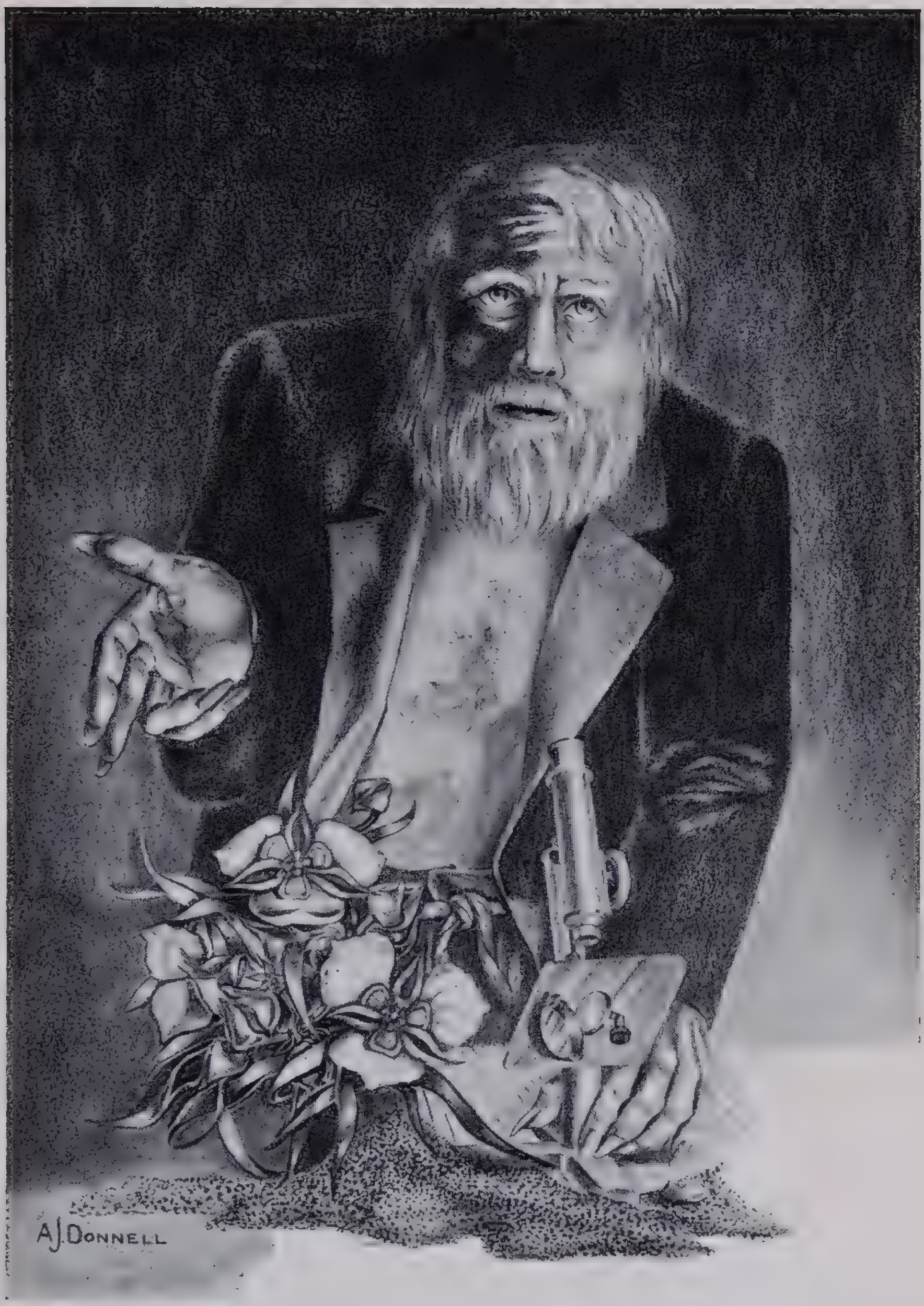
Before Marjorie could reply, Jamieson answered for her.

"You must pardon me, Mr. Brassey, for taking the words out of Miss Driscott's mouth. She was only six years at Brassey House, while I was there ten. I think it is no reflection on her to say that I probably know more about the facts than she can. So far as we were able to learn at Scotland Yard, none of those stolen seeds produced plants that seeded. For, if they had, we should certainly have heard of them. Our competitors, you see, would have at once put the new varieties on the market."

James regarded him with amused curiosity. For the first time since they had met him, and perhaps for the first time in years, he burst into a roar of laughter. The laugh seemed to clear his poisoned brain like a gust of clean wind.

"My dear sir," he gasped, subsiding, "do you know what would have happened? Your competitors would have put the new varieties on the market, would they? Ha! Ha! Wait till you see where these beautiful flowers put their competitors—the human race. I'll show you later, if I'm able. Have a pinch of snuff?" he invited, fumbling for his pill box.

"You left it in your other clothes," Marjorie reminded him. "Please," she begged, "tell us about these plants, and how your people cultivate them. It is all very interesting to us, you know.



"They grow in here like beastly toadstools," he remarked. "If these very intelligent people didn't mind their p's and q's, the whole valley would be swamped, overgrown like a jungle, with the infernal things in one season."

Remember, although it may be commonplace to you, it is like a fairy tale to us."

"I'll tell you all about it. Haven't told a fairy story to a lot of kids since that last Christmas at home. Charles and I were both bachelors, you know. But I'm forgetting my story. Let me see. Oh, yes. I've got it. You know what wild parsnips are?"

"Certainly, ' Vartan interjected. "The only difference between them and decent parsnips, unless you look pretty carefully, is that they are rank poison. We have plenty of them in the Western States."

"We have more than wild parsnips here, Mr. Vartan. Nearly every one of our pretty wild flowers, our fruits and our vegetables come in a dozen different varieties that all look alike till they seed. Some are deadly, others harmless. Others again are good to eat, while their first cousins will worse than kill you. There's one gorgeous larkspur for instance, that would make Charles' mouth water. It comes in about eighteen varieties so much alike that even the natives can't tell them apart till just before the seed capsules break. One kind yields a juice that the women use as a medicine. The people lay great store by it. What the others bear, the devil only knows. Or," he added with a sly chuckle, "only the devil and his instructed pupils.

"You see how it is. The farmers here have to wait till the last moment before the seeds actually ripen until they feel justified in rooting up a plant. And when they do pull one up, they burn it on the spot. Oh, they are civilized. They can make fire without matches. But that's a detail. Occasionally, of course, one plant gets away from them. Then there is the devil to pay. For months at a time, half the population is grubbing on its hands and knees, looking for the first sign of a green spot in the dirt. As I said, one plant gone wild would take the valley in six months or a year. The decent kind, like all things worth having in this life, grow slowly and sparingly."

"You speak of a blue larkspur," Marjorie said, when James paused. "Your brother made one blossom, but only indoors. We saw another by the river, when the guards were bringing us here. They wouldn't let us have it. By the way, to show you how much your brother thinks of you, he named the London flower *Delphinium Brasseii*, hoping it would be fertile, in your honor."

"I hope to God he doesn't plant it where it can bear seeds," James ejaculated.

"He won't," Jamieson assured him. "Charles is too careful of it, as he was of all the others. It has probably died in its tub long before this."

"It was the last, I think you said?" James asked Marjorie.

"The last."

"Then I can die in peace," James sighed. "Up till this moment I have been afraid to die. One can never tell, you know, whether death is a dreamless sleep. That's what bothered Hamlet, wasn't it? If I thought I should have such nightmares all eternity as I've had since I sent Charles that package of seeds, I should commit suicide. No; that wouldn't do. It would be the opposite thing, whatever that is, and there isn't any. I'm glad you came."

"What is the matter with these flowers?" Vartan asked curiously. Was their alleged evil but one of James' fantasies, or was there some fact at its root?

"That," James asserted with an air of great profundity, "is precisely what I am endeavoring to discover, Mr. Vartan. I've been at it now for years and years. Perhaps you will be able to help me. I'll let you have the microscope when I'm not busy. You seem to be a man of intelligence, and you will be here all your life, you know."

Something in James' tone made their blood freeze. He had spoken with a quiet, unarguable conviction of the madman who knows his mind.

"Nonsense, Mr. Brassey," Jamieson spoke up sharply. "If you won't show us an easier path out, we shall find our way up those cliffs. We came down, and I don't see what's to stop us from going up if we have to. Mr. Vartan and I know something about climbing, he especially, and we can take care of Miss Driscott."

"You can't climb up," James asserted with quiet finality, "because the natives won't let you. When I first came here, they resented me. They thought their valley was Heaven, or at least the Garden of Eden. Strangers not welcome. As they don't eat meat—there are no animals except human beings here, I suppose you observed—they have not the sporting instinct. I doubt whether they would have had the courage to kill me if they had wanted to. They had no morals till I taught them."

"Pardon me," Vartan interrupted, "but I don't see the connection."

"No? It is very simple. "When I saw some of the things in these caves, I regretted having sent Charles that silly present. I did it in anger, in a spirit of revenge, for what the world had done to me. You see, I was not quite right at the time. Thank God, Charles never had brains enough to stumble onto the way of making those plants propagate. When I sent the spores I knew no better myself."

"Still I don't follow," Vartan objected.

"Hold on. I'll tell you the whole story. These people disliked my intrusion for selfish reasons. They wished to keep their Eden to themselves. Ask any of them—you'll learn their language in a year or two, or you can talk to the ones I've taught—and they will tell you that this is the happiest spot on earth. They will doubt that there are millions upon millions of monstrosities like you and me and Miss Driscott on this earth. Even now they don't know where I came from. They have never seen another human being like any of us. My native guides were left a good thirty miles from the 'gate' by which I entered this Eden. My first visit lasted two weeks. I saw enough to know that the vague rumors of old stories I had heard from holy fakirs in the hills were not all lies, and that I had rediscovered the flowery paradise of their muddy legends. I needn't go into all that. My mind is clear now, and I must hurry on before it goes black again. It took me two years to find this hell after I got the first clear clue. As you may know, several Brasseys have been great explorers. Their blood was in my veins.

"In those two weeks, I say, I learned enough of what these people are, to know that I had last found the one perfect revenge on the Society that had cast me out. Don't interrupt. I left England by an agreement with my brother Charles. But it was he, not I, who should have been banished. To have resisted would have been worse than useless. Charles could have sworn me into the madhouse in a month.

"I was not mad, I tell you, when I left England. I was not mad when I landed in Bombay. I was not mad when I first entered this hell. Nor am I mad every hour that I am in this place. In proof, consider what I am telling you now. I know as well as you do that his evening dress is the ridiculous whim of a madman. Why do I not destroy it while I have my sanity? Because tomor-

row, or perhaps in half an hour, I shall be a maniac again. Then it will comfort me, and delude me with dreams of the England, my home, that Charles banished me from to save his own lying, hypocritical face.

"My perfect revenge, I say, was in my hand. I took it. Would I have taken it if I had waited four weeks, instead of two, before returning to my camp, thirty miles away, and handing over the letter to Charles with the seeds, to be delivered for mailing at the first government outpost on the way back to India? I would not. Believe me, I would not. Two weeks after my folly, I repented of it. My sane moments in all these years since—God knows how many, I have long lost count—have been torments to which madness has come as a blessed relief.

"I had taken no chance of discovery. The letter with the seeds would be delivered to a runner at the last outpost of civilization in the mountains, hundred of miles from a postoffice or telegraph. My men knew only a word or two of English. Long before the runner reached the nearest mail station, and handed over my letter with the silver to buy stamps, my men would have dispersed to their tiny villages in the hills. They were not professional caravan men. The chances of their being drafted again for such service were nil. Not one of them knew my objective in the mountains, and not one of them dreamed where I had been, thirty miles away, in the fourteen days of my absence. No ordinary explorer would have attempted the way I took, because, without previous knowledge, he would justifiably have concluded that it was impassable. The river of the legends I had gathered sank into a lava waste, roughly as the traditions described. The landslide of those old stories was still visible on the weathered scarp of an unscalable precipice. But thousands of years of erosion and of the incessant impact of water can break a way through a mountain chain, or, failing that, under it. I found the way, and I knew that only accident, or research beyond the patience and credulity of most explorers, would ever again discover the way I had taken.

"In my letter to Charles, I had fabricated a fiction which I knew would cause him pain. Charles, like all hypocrites, is afflicted with a conscience; I told him that I was about to be voluntarily immured because I had seen the great truth of Nirvana. This, I knew, would torture him into a belief that I finally had gone insane through the persecutions of him and our father, and I hoped that

it would spoil his sleep. For Charles always had a sensitive nature.

"What I wrote was a lie. And when I wrote it, I did not dream that before long it was to become the awful truth. I *am* immured, and so are you, Mr. Vartan, Mr. Jamieson, and Miss Driscott. There is no escape from this place but death. You also will go insane, as I have, and you also will have your brief interludes of sanity. Then you will remember cities and human faces, clean linen and decent food. I do not know why you have come, or how you found your way to this hell. All that I know, or care to know, is that we shall be here till we die.

"One of you asked a moment ago what bearing morals have on all this. Morals, perhaps is not the right word. As I told you, the people here resented my presence for selfish reasons. They did not want to share their paradise with strangers or deformities like me. I encouraged them in their selfishness, and made it ethical from the higher point of view of a greater selfishness—that of the whole human race, except this selfish handful. I trained them to keep constant watch on the precipices of the valley, lest the seemingly impossible should happen, and other undesirables find their way into this Eden of hell. It was I who induced them to toil like slaves for eighteen months, until their united labor had started an avalanche of stone which toppled over a huge buttress of solid rock to stop up, from the inside, the old river channel by which I myself had entered. Exit or entrance, except by the way you came, down the precipices, is blocked. You will not be allowed to attempt to climb out, and any who are foolish enough to follow the way you took, will be immured as we are.

"I have made these peoples' laws. It was easy; their own selfishness makes them obedient. They respect me because I pander to their selfishness, and they will enforce my laws when I am dead because it is to their own interest to do so. Why did I immure myself? Because, to seal this hell off from the outside world, I had to supervise the simple engineering from the inside. Not one of these selfish people would have ventured outside his paradise to assist me.

"Your coming has brought me the only peace I have known since I entered this place. It is more than I deserve. Before you condemn me, hear why I have tried to make such restitution to humanity as is possible—by immuring myself and all these people.

"My letter to Charles, I felt certain, would be equivalent in

his eyes to an announcement of my death. I had no intention of dying, slowly or otherwise. While he was suffering the tortures of conscience in brooding over my lingering death, I would be living like a normal human being where he would never dream of looking for me. I planned to make my way through China to a seaport, work my passage to America, and begin life anew. I would forget the money in the Bombay Bank. But the valley, with its marvellous flowers that I could not understand, with its misshapen weeds of human beings that I do not yet understand, and with all the evil mysteries of its deadly spores, intrigued me, and, yielding to an irresistable impulse, I decided to explore it thoroughly before setting my face toward China. When the last of my caravan disappeared over a distant pass, I made my way back to this place with my books and my microscope.

"Within two weeks after my return I realized what I had done. To recall the letter was impossible; it would have reached London months before I could cross China and cable Charles not to open it. You may ask why I did not attempt to return to India. I do not know how you came, but by the way I took, that also would have been impossible. No man travelling alone, with only such food and water as he himself could carry, could possibly make his way through the wilderness of mountains and deserts that we crossed on our journey here. I could only pray that such mischief as Charles might do with those accursed seeds would be localized and controlled, and not escape to scourge the world, as it well might from ignorance or carelessness. For the rest, trusting in Providence to undo what I had done, I devoted my life and my reason to making this hell forever inaccessible to mankind.

"I ask you, am I guilty of a crime against humanity, or not guilty? My intention was to destroy Charles, as he had sought to destroy me. Only his incompetence has saved the world."

20

SETTLED

"MY VOTE WOULD BE NOT GUILTY," MARJORIE replied in a low tone. "And I'm sure the others will agree with me. You have done everything humanly possible to correct your mistake."

"I have," James asserted. "On my word of honor, I did not know the real character, in all its devilishness, of those spores when I sent them to Charles. You are something of a botanist, of course, after all your years at Brassey House?" Marjorie nodded. James handed her one of the scarlet flowers from the centre piece. "Take a look at that, as a botanist, and tell me what you think it is."

"I have been looking at it carefully all the time you were speaking. As a botanist, I would say it is impossible. Yet, here it is."

"I agree," James declared emphatically. "As you know, I also worked at Brassey House, expecting to take over the business some day, before my exile. Studied plants thoroughly. In fact," he recalled with a touch of pride, "I was once offered a chair in the University of London. If I had accepted," he continued with a grim smile, "I shouldn't be here now. Charles was jealous of me—wanted the business for himself. All his puttering at biology was a pretense. From the very beginning I suspected him, and when he turned against me, I knew my suspicions were well grounded. But let that go. Charles has what he wants, and I'm here—for life.

To get back to this flower. It is only one of thousands of species, each as impossible as this. And yet, as you say, here it is."

"Where did it come from?" Vartan asked curiously.

"Presently," James replied. "All in good time and in proper order. You mustn't hurry me, or irritate me, or I shall lose my temper. That would be bad for all of us."

Marjorie shot Vartan a warning glance, which Jamieson also interpreted correctly. They let James talk himself out in his own way.

"Like you, Miss Driscott," he resumed, "I didn't believe my own eyes. But I had my microscope and half a dozen good biologies and botanies that I had carted through the hills with me, expecting to throw them all away when I made my final dash alone for China. When I changed my mind, and came in here to explore for a bit, I brought the lot. And I'm glad I did. They have been a tremendous help. Not believing my own eyes, I used the microscope. I'm pretty good at it, you know.

"When I finally did understand what I was seeing, I almost went mad—long before I did. Mr. Jamieson, here, is a policeman of some sort, I gather, so he won't know what a cell is. Although I don't pretend to know myself, in any fundamental scientific sense, I can give a definition that will satisfy a policeman. For his benefit, let us think of a cell as one of the smallest organized units of living matter. Plants are built up out of millions and millions of cells, just as animals are. When I left England, cells and their embedded chromosomes were all the rage among the students of evolution and heredity. I well remember Professor Bolton, in a lecture before the Royal Society, closing his magnificent address with these words: 'Ask the cell, and it will tell you what you are, what your ancestors were, and what your descendants will become. Millions of years of past evolution are recorded in the intricate records of the cell, and in its invisible, ultra-microscopic bodies; billions of years, possibly, of the undreamed history of the future of our race are compressed into that tiny volume which our successors, if not we ourselves, will read to its last letter. We are what our cells make us.'

"Remembering Professor Bolton's address, I was convinced at first that my microscope was lying. It showed me scores of impossibilities at one look. Almost anyone, even an amateur, can distinguish at a glance between a plant cell and an animal cell under

the microscope. What I saw were certainly cells. Yet they were neither plant nor animal cells. In spite of myself I was driven by my demon to accept the working hypothesis that these cells were intermediate between plant cells and animals cells, as they shared the characteristics of both.

"Do you wonder that I suspected for a moment that Charles might have been right in forcing me to leave England?

"As a serious student of plant biology in my work at Brassey House, and as a not wholly fatuous amateur in animal biology, I realized that I was in the presence of a form of life which is alien to this earth. Animal-plants, or plant-animals, in any real sense such as I had just discovered, are unknown in the whole history of terrestrial evolution as we know it. I do not refer, of course, to such childish analogies as that of the pitcher plant, which is said to consume small insects for its food, and which is therefore often superficially said to be partly plant and partly animal. No; my hybrids were genuine plant-animals. The slightest accidental variations of temperature, or of moisture, or of atmospheric electricity, or of a dozen other physical causes, might well start the spores of these abominations along their evolutions to a fully organized plant or to a perfect animal.

"More, the same chance fluctuations may easily tip the germinating seed of one specimen definitely toward the animals or the plants. The matured thing developed from one of these spores may be, as far as I can see, either a foul fungus, condemned to spend its rooted existence clinging to one dank spot, or it may become an aggressive animal, wandering at will over all the earth.

"You may imagine that I did not spend all of my days and nights with my eye on the microscope. These people had to be governed, to be taught to isolate themselves like a city with the plague, and to see that no decent human being ever discovered their hellish paradise. Much of my time went in mastering their language, and in instructing them by dumb show, until I had learned to speak their jargon, how to make their Eden inaccessible to outsiders. In this work I became familiar with my subjects in all of their shocking deformities, from the shaggy deaf mutes to the shapeless lumps of protoplasm infesting these infernal bogs, that are neither man nor beast, plant nor animal, but obscene things half way between plants and animals that yet are cursed with the spark of life, and the power of reproducing their horrible kind, either by

division or by seeding. Even now I cannot look on one of these travesties of life without my gorge rising. They are unnatural and unclean, because their life is the life of things which were not first evolved on this earth, but possibly millions of light years away on blighted planets circling dying suns.

"In one of these early expeditions to the seething marshes that seem to stretch indefinitely in all directions under the roots of these mountains—I have not yet explored the half of them—I made my second discovery. By some mishap one of those lumbering human creatures, like the ones you saw, had slipped and cut itself on the sharp rocks. To my horror I saw that its blood was a vivid green, like the condensed coloring matter of leaves. Thinking I had gone mad, I deliberately gashed another with a flint—these poor creatures seem to have no nerves in the ordinary sense—and watched it bleed. Its blood was purplish. Trying again, several times, on others of the herd, I finally found one whose blood was red, like an animal's. Thereafter I experimented for days, observing the same creatures constantly as they dragged themselves from one part of the caves to another, testing their blood frequently, and noting the effects of exercise, of light and darkness, on the coloring matter.

"I found that the blood of each one of those poor creatures varied from green to red and back again to green, depending upon exercise, food, and light. When the blood was green, the thing was inert as a lump of jelly, wallowing motionless for days in the marsh. As the spores began to grow on its hide covering it with a dense paste, the creature, absorbing some kind of nourishment through the pores of its skin, would gradually quicken into motion and become a living animal. Then it would swim out of the muck, the hard jelly on its hide multiplying itself like a forest of fungi, and slowly make its way up to the driest rocks, to bask and ripen the growing food on its body. Did you see them feeding up yonder? Then you know the rest. When one is thoroughly cleaned of all its food, it finds its way back to the black marshes, wallows far out into the slime, and gradually ceases to be an animal, although it is still living. So the rhythm of these abominations goes, from plant life to animal life, and back to plant life.

"They, and more distressing perversions of life which, I trust, you will never see, seem to be practically immortal. In my first month here I tried in mercy to kill one, by cutting it to pieces.

I was discovered by two of the natives just as I finished. From the blank horror on their faces I learned that these people do not kill. The next day I understood why they are so unmerciful. Each of the lumps into which I had cut the poor creature was healing in the black muck of the marsh and growing into a new abomination like the one I had destroyed. Fire alone can end their unnatural existence.

"But is it unnatural? Are these repulsive scarlet flowers not as beautiful, as natural in their own way, which is not our way nor the way of our own flowers, as the manifestations of life to which we have been accustomed? While I am as I am now, and can remember an English bean field, or the whins on a common, and when the faces of the young people I knew rise up fresh and living before me, I see only horror in the mad plant-animals which multiply like bacteria in these caves. But when I forget what I once was, and dream only that I am ill, these flowers become as beautiful as the blooms of a forgotten life remembered in a dream, and the loathsome hulks in the marshes are my familiar friends from long ago.

"I have not been idle in my prison. To understand what I see, and to account for it on rational grounds, has been the passion of my life. Let us forget the things which crawl over these stone floors, or swell and breathe in the marshes, and ask the secret only of the flowerlike things that grow like fungi in this smoky light, and of the less repulsive fruits and weeds of the valley. If you had been trained as I was in the evolution of dead and living spores of plants, you would say at once that these growing things of ours defy the laws of terrestrial evolution. They never could have come into being on our earth. I say, then, that this Eden of hell and all the plants in it, are a fragment of a garden from another world.

"Not, I say, from a meteorite or from some wandering member of our own solar system, but from the wreck of a world, ages ago, in the depths of space. On that world, shattered perhaps before our own came into existence, life had already progressed far along its evolution in a groove different from that which our living things have followed. The very elements which coalesced to form the first living cells may have been different, in some way which we cannot guess, from the carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, nitrogen and the rest that gave us our own first living cells. Who can deny,"

he concluded defiantly, "that such another world may have existed? Can you?"

He had fixed Vartan with his glittering eyes, perhaps unwittingly.

"I wouldn't venture either to contradict your hypothesis or to affirm it," Vartan replied. He spoke as straightforwardly as if he were addressing a scientific colleague. "As for the origin of the valley, and of these caves, I had already suggested your explanation to Miss Driscott. Beyond a doubt all this curious formation has been caused as you say. Millions of years ago the earth was hit, full-on, by a colossal fragment of highly radioactive rock and compacted dirt from the depths of interstellar space. Why shouldn't it have carried the spores of life with it, even if the journey through space, until it struck our earth, took millions of years?

"It is not impossible that the spores of living things, say these plant-animals of yours, could retain life that long. We freeze cold-blooded frogs and fishes solid for months in ice, and they are as lively as ever when they thaw out. Your 'plant-animals', I suspect, are 'cold blooded', like frogs. The spores might well have retained their vitality in the absolute cold of interstellar space. When the fragment struck our earth, the warmth revived the spores, and they began to live again. They had brought with them one of the conditions necessary to their natural life—the high radioactivity of the soil. As that lessened with the lapse of time, the plants gradually adapted themselves to the change. What we find now in your caves and valley are the slowly evolved descendants of those remote spores, that lived on a world that went to smash before ours cooled."

"And my other speculation," James inquired, "about all this having started from chemical elements different from the ones we know?"

"Again, I see no reason for saying it is impossible. Physicists have begun to learn something in the years since you left England. Perhaps this will interest you. Only a few years ago the astonomers and physicists proved that a certain star—the Companion to Sirius—is made of a gas—a gas, mind you—which is so dense that a cubic inch of it would weigh about a ton. Is that 'chemical matter' in the way they used to mean the term? It is not. Imagine that almost unbelievably dense little dwarf of a sun, or one like it, as the lord of your spore bearing planet, and you have what you

want. However, to my mind, the vital thing is that all this has happened somehow. Here it is."

"I knew you were a sensible man," James sighed, "the moment I set eyes on you. Does Mr. Jamieson know any science?"

"Not much," Jamieson admitted humbly. "For my part, I should like to hear how Mr. Vartan explains these ghastly squid things, that you say are human. I don't believe they are. Mr. Vartan is so good at explaining," he concluded with a maddening resumption of his long horse-faced manner, "that I am sure his theory will be as good as yours, Mr. Brassey, of the plants was. You must pardon me, gentlemen, but I am only a police officer, as one of you kindly put it. But I am always eager to learn facts that may be of value in the discharge of my somewhat unpleasant duties." His tone was not wholly free of irony.

"Tomorrow will do," James answered briefly. "I've had enough talk for one evening." He rubbed one taloned hand across his puzzled forehead. "What's the matter with me? Something at dinner must have disagreed with my stomach. I beg you to excuse me. Will you make yourselves comfortable if I retire? The servants will be here presently to show you to your rooms. You are here for life, you know, like me. So make yourselves at home."

He lurched to his feet, and stood swaying unsteadily with his hands resting on the triangular table.

"Quick!" Jamieson snapped, rising to support him. "He's going again, and he may be out of his head for months. The excitement has worn off. We've got to make him talk before he goes. Mr. Brassey," he demanded in a loud voice, "do you know us?"

James stared uncomprehendingly into the face peering into his own.

"You are," he stammered, "you are—. Blest if I can remember your name."

"Jamieson. I've come here to take you home to your brother Charles. In London. Tell us how to get out of this place. There must be an easier way than the one we came. I'll take you home. Miss Driscott is Charles' agent, and Mr. Vartan came with her for the same purpose. How do we get out?"

"There is no way," James answered thickly. "I told you all that."

"Then we must go back alone and leave you here."

"How? You can't. Can't. Let me sleep."

"In a moment. If you don't tell us, we shall elude your spies, and find our way up the precipices somehow. It can be done. Are you going to let us take you home, or will you stay here and die?"

James suddenly sat down, heavily.

"Let me think," he muttered. "Let me think. You go. I die. Can't live forever." He clutched a large handful of the dried flowers and leaves on the table. "I die. You go. How will you go?"

"I have told you," Jamieson insisted. "Vartan and I are experienced travellers. We can find a way up, if we must. And we shall. Tell us the other way out. There must be one."

"Isn't. Don't bother me. I die. You go. Oh, my God!"

He sunk his face on his arms and burst into horrible sobbing. Marjorie hastened to his side and laid a comforting hand on his shoulder.

"We won't leave you, Mr. Brassey. You must come with us."

"Can't," he groaned. "No way."

"We'll find a way," Vartan promised, "if we have to fly. I've been in worse messes than this, and I always got out somehow or another."

James looked up, his grimy face the picture of misery. Vartan's quiet assurance had convinced him.

"You will find a way. I can't stop you. Tell Charles he was right. I'm the one who should have left England. I bear him no grudge."

"Why not come with us?" Marjorie urged. "Charles will take care of you till you are well and happy again."

"Never," he muttered, and sank into a doze, his right hand still tightly clutching the refuse of dead flowers and withered leaves.

"What on earth are we to do?" Vartan asked, staring at his companions.

"He will never leave this place," Jamieson answered curtly. "Don't you see that it is impossible? His mind is completely gone. We shall have the very devil of a time getting up one of those cataracts ourselves. With a madman along, we should all break our necks in the first half hour."

"Very well," Marjorie replied, sitting down, "we shall have to wait until we do find a safer way."

"What do you mean?" Jamieson demanded, going pale.

"Isn't it obvious?"

"I don't see it."

"Perhaps you wouldn't," she retorted coolly. "Do you see it, Mr. Vartan?"

"Good Lord," Vartan burst out, reddening, "a blind man could see it."

"Thank you, Mr. Vartan. Now, Mr. Jamieson, do you see the point?"

Jamieson sat down sulkily.

"Oh, I suppose so. You two are as crazy as he is. Wait till you've seen as much of the true side of life as I have. The dirty, seamy side. Then you'll value your own life at its real worth."

"Which isn't much, sometimes," Marjorie reminded him. "You are part native, are you not?"

"Pah!" Jamieson spat with a gesture of contempt. "The British 'sporting instinct' again. It always made me sick. Why take a chance when you know you have none? If what that lunatic told us is true, and he seemed pretty sure of his crazy story, there is no other way out of this hole. Why don't we do our job and get out? He's happier here than he ever could be in England. They would lock him up the minute we landed. Look at things in a practical, common sense way. What did we come here for?"

"I came to get a shovelful of dirt," Vartan replied drily. "And until I get it, I shall stay here."

"Then let us get it and go."

"Where do you find this precious dirt?" Vartan drawled.

"In the marshes."

"How do you know?"

"Charles Brassey told you to bring him four pounds of the soil in which *Delphinium Brasseii* flourishes in the native state. Well, those delphiniums are growing as rankly as reeds all around the margins of the swamps in the cave that opens into this one on the left."

"When did you see them?" Marjorie interposed with biting sarcasm. Jamieson flushed.

"When the guards brought me in here and turned me over to James. He wandered off in a dream after he had talked for an hour or more about what to get for dinner."

"Then you explored?" Vartan suggested in a colorless tone.

"I looked around a bit. What he says of the plants and animals in some of those swamps is not half the truth. This place is hell on earth."

"The forbidden garden," Marjorie murmured. "Well, Mr. Vartan, are you going to get your four pounds of black earth? You just said you would stay till you did."

"Surely," he smiled. "But does that imply that I'll go when I've got my four pounds?"

"You might be prepared to start when we do find a way out," she hinted.

"I might," Vartan agreed. "But I probably shan't, if packing four pounds of marsh muck is part of my preparations."

"You will procrastinate till the last moment? I thought you were an American."

"I am," Vartan admitted. "But not to the extent of selling my soul for fifty thousand dollars. The trouble with you two is that neither of you knows any first hand science. Jamieson is a great detective, and you, Miss Driscott, have specialized as a confidential agent. Neither of you, I could see, believed poor James Brassey when he told you about these animal-plants. Do you remember, Miss Driscott, how he said the seeds that man with the swab was scraping off those beasts' hides were the 'seeds of madness'? He meant that the flowers—or perhaps the pollen—that spring from those seeds do exactly what he implied: drive people crazy. You yourself reminded me of cocaine. That's a vegetable product.

"Now I believe the meat of what James said. Neither of you do, or you wouldn't be willing to take a chance on that 'black dirt'. It must be practically a solid mass of spores of the most dangerous plants—if you can call them that—on earth. I'll spend my old age here with James before I take back a single spore of that infernal stuff. But I'll get out somehow empty-handed. I'm no self-immuring martyr."

Jamieson's face slowly broke into its broad, genial grin. Rising, he extended his hand—an un-English thing to do.

"Shake," he said. "At last I have proved to the bottom that you are on our side, and not with the spies who have been doing their damnedest for thirteen years to make off with what was eft of James' sample to Charles of this same black earth. Pardon me for having suspected you to the last moment, but some of the ablest crooks in the world are on the other side. And at last

I understand why. James is right, fundamentally. This stuff, let loose to propagate in the full sunlight, would wreck the population of a country within four or five years. The scientific details don't matter. I agree with you that James is essentially right.

"We can argue the science later, when we have taken poor old James back to his brother, and this place is forgotten. If there is any danger of it being rediscovered, which I doubt, the United Nations can fence it off till all the inhabitants are rescued, and then administer it—somehow. And I beg your pardon too, Miss Driscott," he concluded, bowing to her, "for having made slighting remarks about your 'British sporting instinct'. You will understand that I did it purely for professional purposes, to draw out our friend Vartan. There is just one little kink, however, that has not been straightened out.

"You, Miss Driscott, seemed by your insinuations against my own sporting sense, to slur my mother, and you reminded me that I am part native." He drew himself up stiffly. " I am proud that my mother's mother was a full blooded Indian woman, prouder far than of the fact that my mother's father was an English officer, although I am proud of that too. I know this is not the sort of thing an Englishman would say. I'm part Indian, and I'm glad of it. I can speak of my feelings without being ashamed. And finally I am proud that my father's people, appreciating my mixed blood, made me one of its most trusted servants in the one sphere where I could be most useful. No apology for what you said is necessary, Miss Driscott."

"I shall not apologize," she replied somewhat distantly. "Instead, let me congratulate you. So you will stay with Mr. Vartan and me till we get poor James out of this awful place?"

"That is what I have been trying to tell you, Miss Driscott."

"Thank you," she murmured. "I knew all along you were acting. You didn't do it very well. Shall we look for places to sleep?"

"Hadn't we better make James comfortable first?" Vartan proposed. "Here, Jamieson, you take his legs and I'll take his arms. We can cover him up on one of these couches of leaves."

Having made James as easy as they could, they went in search of sleeping quarters for themselves. Frequently in their wanderings they were warned away from inviting entrances by Jamieson, who

declared that the living things in them were not decent for human eyes to see.

"I explored pretty thoroughly all about here, this afternoon," he explained. "Our best prospect is clear at the end of the cave you first entered. There are several small holes in the wall there that looked like servants' quarters."

They were nearly a third of a mile away from the exit leading to the spiral river, when they heard a despairing yell. Turning instantly, they saw James waving his arms and hailing them frantically. As they started to run toward him, they distinguished the words he was shouting at the top of his lungs.

"You will escape," he yelled, "and I shall die. Others will learn of this place. Then the whole world will be hell."

He had fled through the exit to the river. In his right hand he brandished the sheaf of withered flowers which he had clutched when he seemed to fall asleep. He was still clad in the pathetic rags of his evening clothes.

Racing after him, they saw him dash dizzily down the spiral rim of the river. Thinking he planned to drown himself, they shouted to him to stop; to follow at his speed was impossible. His bare feet and his mad luck saved him from slipping into the black oil of the shooting torrent.

"Come back!" they shouted.

He hesitated, and finally halted, balancing himself precariously on the sharp rim. Reaching into his trouser pocket, he drew forth some small object whose precise nature they could not see.

"None of us shall escape!" he yelled, "and there shall be no more hell on earth."

They realized now what James had taken from his pocket. He had told them that the inhabitants knew how to make fire, but not the details. They saw a fan of sparks shoot out and bury themselves in the dried flowers. Instantly the bundle was ablaze.

They fled for their lives before the oil on the river burst into whirling pillars of flame, kindling the explosive mixture of air and gas in the funnel. The deafening detonation hurled them back, stunned and bleeding, into the cave from which they had emerged.

James had paid his score and settled all his debts.

21

LISTENING

INSPECTOR RANSOME WAS NOT THE MAN TO LET chagrin get the better of his professional judgement. After the sting of Miss Tappan-West's 'Fathead' cablegram had ceased to smart as painfully as it had when inserted, Ransome began to analyze the situation in a cool, impersonal manner. He had relied implicity on her honesty. That she should be an employee of the spying enemy was undeniably a slur on the Inspector's good sense. The incident drove home to him once more the sinister truth that he was fighting a highly skilled band of conspirators, to whom time and money were details of no importance.

Miss West, he shrewdly suspected, did not know who her principals were, and probably had no inkling of their purpose. They, most likely, had simply given her certain elementary jobs of spying to do, probably through agents three or four times removed from their great headquarters, hinting to her that the game in which she was employed was all one of innocent trade rivalry. Ransome had learned enough about the case in the many years he had been engaged on it, to know that no mere commercial jobbery was responsible for the expertly concealed net of intrigue. On the matter of Miss West he could not justly accept all the blame. She had entered the employ of Scotland Yard with unimpeachable references, having been strongly recommended by no less an authority than the great Jamieson, one of the best all-around detectives in the world, and without peer in the difficult field of oriental

crime and intrigue. If the enemy had succeeded in deceiving the infallible and impeccable Jamieson, Inspector Ransome felt that he himself was not as dull as Miss Tappan-West seemed to hint.

Ransome, letting his trained mind play over the crisis, did not rest content with a salve to his stung pride. To set all doubts at rest, he determined to proceed as soon as possible to India and take up the threads from there. A really competent agent, he not unfairly concluded, should be able to trace Miss West without undue difficulty. Before embarking however, he must spend a week or two in setting his affairs in London in order, to run by themselves for a year if necessary.

At last all of his preparations were concluded. He called up his old friend Charles, whom he had not seen since the embarrassing interview over Shane's cable, and asked him to drop in on his way home. Charles Brassey did not wait for five o'clock, but went at once to Scotland Yard.

"I'll wager John has blundered again," he thought as he hailed a cab. "John is growing old, like the rest of us. Oh, well —."

Ransome made a full confession of all the humiliating history of the Tappan-West incident, not omitting the undeserved 'Fathead' which she had hurled at him. Brassey listened in silence.

"You say Jamieson vouched for Miss West?" he asked ominously when Ransome had finished his penance.

The Inspector flushed. Keeping his temper, he reiterated the points he had tried to make. It was obvious, he insisted, that agents who could deceive Jamieson must be among the most expert criminals in the world. Brassey agreed. And it was also evident, Ransome argued, that the capture of Miss West would go a long way toward clearing up the mystery of the spies. With her as a starting point, Ransome declared that he would undertake to find her real employers in a month. Charles was less enthusiastic.

"Catch her first," he advised.

"What do you mean?" Ransome demanded, reddening.

"Have we ever caught one of the spies who have infested Brassey House for the past thirteen years?"

"You know, Charles," Ransome protested, "our best men have given all that is in them to this case. And, as I told you once before this time *I've got my man.*"

"Who is he?" Brassey demanded.

"Vartan."

"Vartan?" Brassey echoed, with a trace of alarm. "My dear John, you must be mistaken."

"No," Ransome affirmed decisively, "I know what I am talking about. I wouldn't have told you unless you had asked. You brought it on yourself. You think me unreasonably off the track. All I ask is that you wait till the conclusion of the whole matter."

Brassey turned to leave with a shrug of resigned despair.

"Hold on," Ransome admonished. "Don't run off with a wrong idea. I told you Vartan is my man. But did I say in what sense he is my man?"

"You didn't," Brassey admitted. "Because," he added after a doubtful pause, "it sounds like sheer nonsense."

Ransome balanced himself on his toes and regarded his friend with amused good humor.

"The trouble with you, Charles, is your suspicion of everyone's good sense but your own. I shan't offer to bet with you. It would be taking an unfriendly advantage. But just let me say this: even you will acknowledge, when I finally lay the complete solution before you, that Vartan, in the only sense that matters, is my man."

Charles mumbled something that Ransome did not quite catch.

"And when will you do all this?" he demanded, speaking up.

"As soon as I see Jamieson or Miss West. I'm off tonight for Bombay."

"What!" Charles ejaculated. "Alone?"

"Alone. I have decided it is time for me to devote all my energies to this case."

"That's something like it," Brassey exclaimed, "and I'm coming with you."

"It may be dangerous, Charles," Ransome warned him.

"Precisely. I need some excitement, and I'm going to find it in Srinagar."

"You have inside information?" Ransome suggested, lapsing into his professional manner.

"No, but I suspect that Shane has."

"Not a bad guess," Ransome commented approvingly. "That is, for an amateur."

"Amateur?" Brassey echoed. "Wait and see. Well, I must run home and pack my bag. Ask one of your clerks to get me a reservation, will you? Anything will do. I'll see you at the airport."

Before Ransome could agree, Brassey was gone.

Their journey together was almost a holiday, in spite of the sombre worries which neither could quite forget for five seconds. They were old and tried friends, and this was their chance to talk out the whole baffling mystery.

At Bombay, they took a plane at once for Srinagar, Ransome to pick up Miss West's trail there, Brassey to talk over scientific matters with Shane. Arriving at Srinagar, they went immediately to the inn where Shane was still convalescing. Although he was now able to get about with a pair of walking sticks, he preferred his fascinating slides over all exercise except that strictly necessary to limber up his muscles.

At the moment of Brassey's arrival, Shane was in his room, busy with his slides and the obliging diatomaniac's microscope. Dr. Wemyss was with him, chatting of things in general and of the vanished Miss West in particular. Ransome, of course, dropped his own name and took that of the ubiquitous Mr. Smith. Before registering at the inn, he agreed with Charles that henceforth he must exist incognito. Brassey was enjoying his sleuthing tremendously.

They registered in silence, as strangers, and Ransome unobtrusively set about his business of worming out the history of Miss Tappan while she still was a guest at the inn. His bag disposed of, Brassey asked the clerk to send up his card to Mr. Shane. In a few minutes, Brassey was listening to an excited invitation, over the office telephone, to "come right up."

At the door of Shane's room, Brassey met Dr. Wemyss, who had insisted on leaving when he heard that Shane was to receive a guest. Wemyss glanced sharply at the elderly man in an effort to diagnose him. The doctor's hobby was sizing up the physical conditions of all strangers he met, and later, when fortune favored him and delivered an occasional subject into his hands as a patient, checking up his first lightening estimate against the verdict of a careful examination.

"There goes John Bull's solidest prime minister in a century," he thought. "Dignified, conservative, sane almost to a fault, rational as a hopeless maniac, and slow as the Rock of Gibraltar. Digestion perfect; blood pressure normal; no organic disease; mind strong and vigorous. Will last to the late eighties. Fine specimen of British late middle age." Wemyss' verdict confirmed that of poor James.

While Ransome quietly absorbed more information about Miss Tappan's sojourn at the inn than perhaps she herself would have recalled, without once giving the impression that he was pumping anyone, Shane and Brassey spent fourteen hours a day arguing over the curious evidence afforded by Shane's slides. To Brassey, the strange things which Shane believed he was observing were at first almost conclusive evidence that his own theory, formulated years previously, of the origin of James' incomprehensible seeds was substantially correct. Only after a week of Shane's persistent criticism would he admit that the all-essential element was absent.

"I give in," he said generously, when Shane had compelled him for about the hundredth time to study with his own eyes the minute specks of dust carefully mounted on about thirty slides. "Still, you must admit that mine was not an utterly unreasonable hypothesis."

"Haven't I been admitting it ever since I began working for you?" Shane expostulated. "Until three weeks ago I would have backed your theory with my last dollar. These slides destroy it, as you must see."

"You win, for the present. I grant that what you have there are merely fragments of fossilized spores."

"And pretty badly smashed fragments at that," Shane added, "I doubt whether there are two bits of one and the same kind of spore in all of these specimens."

"These, in your opinion, are totally different from the dust you analysed at Brassey House?"

"Absolutely," Shane asserted decisively. "If you could only have given me a few complete spores to examine, instead of the odds and ends of broken ones still clinging to the fibres of James' original package, I could have proved conclusively that those spores had been alive within historic times. As it was, the evidence was all but complete. These, on the other hand, must have been fossilized hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of years ago."

"But you do not reject the rest of my theory?" Charles persisted with rather pathetic hopefulness. "Remember, I was once a trained biologist. You will agree that those useless fragments of living spores which you did succeed in salvaging, could never have sprung from terrestrial plants?"

"Of course I agree. Haven't I maintained all along that they were clear out of the range of plant evolution on this earth? Like

you, I reached the only reasonable conclusion: they must have come from outside the earth. Where would be the most likely place to look for them? Obviously in uncontaminated glacial ice on the highest mountains. I forget what the exact estimate is of the amount of meteoric and other non-terrestrial dust that settles on the Himalayas in a day, but it is up in the hundreds of tons. I must say," he acknowledged, "the results of my work have been a great disappointment to me. Out of literally thousands of grains of dust from the sediments of all my black ice that I have examined, I have found less than forty that can reasonably pass as fossil remains of living things. All the rest are inorganic."

"And those broken spores of poor James' were almost without exception traces of organic bodies?"

"Beyond a doubt. More important, as I said before, they had been alive within human times. No, Mr. Brassey, we have not solved the puzzle yet. Your plants are not of this earth. Therefore they must have originated outside our system. How did those still living spores ever get here? We don't know. I feel sure, however, that it must have been by some rare accident—if there is such a thing in nature—that happens only once in several geologic ages. It must have been a 'chance' as rare as the full collision of two stars. Your theory is not so preposterous as a cocksure ignoramus might say it is."

"What about Vartan's?"

"He never told me what it was, but I guessed. From what I suspect, his 'preposterous hypothesis' might easily account for the evolution of your plants after they once reached the earth, but it could not explain how they ever got here. No —"

He was interrupted by the telephone.

"Hello? Shane speaking. Yes, Mr. Brathwaite? He is here with me now." He turned to Charles. "Mr. Brassey, one of the Brathwaites wishes to speak to you." He handed Brassey the instrument.

"Charles Brassey speaking. Bad news, you say? All right; speak out. I'm ready."

Over the wire Shane heard the bald statement that about thirty porters had been discovered, without their headman, in an inaccessible wilderness of the Karakorums by a party of Indian Government surveyors. Further, Vartan, Miss Driscott and the missing headman had gone on alone, into a desolate mountain

region on foot. All this had been sent back, post haste, by runner, telegraph and radio to civilization by the British officers of the survey.

"When did this happen?" Brassey asked, going pale.

"We can't tell exactly from the porters' stories, but we should judge between four and nine days ago."

"And they had nothing with them but their packs?"

"Only their packs and sleeping bags. Shall I come over to the inn, or will you meet me here at the office?"

"I'll come at once," Brassey answered, hanging up the receiver. He turned to Shane, his face as white as paper. "They must be perishing now. Good God! To think that I drove Marjorie to her death."

"You haven't," Shane snapped. "All three are alive and well at this instant. You don't know Vartan as I do. That boy could get out of hell."

Shane's optimism was a trifle too rosy. For seven days of horror, Vartan and his companions had been trying to escape from the inferno which James, in his last mad gesture, had bequeathed to the world. Beaten by odds which not the most daring of men could discount, Vartan had given up hope. His one concern at the moment when Shane expressed his unlimited confidence in his former leader, was to hide his despair from Marjorie and Jamieson. James had not been mistaken.

The infernal Eden was completely sealed off from the outer world. Entrance or exit was blocked in all ways but one, and the perilous possibilities of this had been denied them unanswerably in the first half hour after James' death. They could not even begin to risk the climb up one of the crumbling cataracts. Vartan almost prayed that Marjorie and Jamieson might be taken unawares by death, and pass painlessly out of their torment as had most of the natives in the first two days of the horror. Then he could face his own certain fate unflinchingly. Barring this merciful deliverance, he must hide his hopelessness to the end, and keep their minds off the inevitable by feverish marches from one doomed spot to another, knowing that escape was impossible and that all of his assumed decisiveness was a futile pretense.

James Brassey's mad inspiration was as effective as he had intended it to be. The spiral river, coated with at least two feet of black oil from the accumulated oozes of the valley and the caverns, thundered its gyrating course around the funnel in folds and curtains of crimson fire like the fitful involutions of a boreal aurora. Fronds of flame fingered their way over the arched dome above the funnel, obliterating at last the cold yellowish white glow of the rock ceiling, and a dense black snow of enormous soot flakes drifted slowly down into the abyss. The distant fall of the circling torrent at last made itself fully audible, finding its voice in curling banners of clear red fire that rose from the invisible last plunge of the oil, to hover for an instant above the funnel in detached clouds of flame that consumed themselves and vanished. New fissures opened suddenly with explosive reports in the red hot rocks, releasing pent up domes of oil to gush forth in fire, till the whole chamber of the river and all of its tributary caverns were a solid mass of compact flames.

The misshapen mistakes of an evolution alien to this earth vanished instantly in wisps of vapor; spores still virulent with mad life glowed fitfully in their foul beds, the last, deep embers of a forgotten order of living things.

Subterranean marshes evaporated in a flash; the steam of their dissolution, bursting asunder the massive barriers of rock between one cavern and its neighbors, ripped the heart of the mountains apart, again releasing deluges of oil to feed the furnace and consume utterly the last vestige of forbidden life.

As explosion after explosion tore the heart out of the mountains, the whole wall of the valley began to smoke in ominous prophecy of the universal fire to come. Noble precipices, that had withstood the frost and scorching suns of a million years, slowly bulged, hung suspended for a second on the void air, and thundered down in appalling avalanches of stone to the valley floor. As the tumbling rock ceased to fall, spreading fanwise in broad deltas from the base of the precipice, the dammed up oil from a score of age-old reservoirs burst forth, kindling instantly on the heated surfaces of the fractured rock. With each fourteen thousand foot avalanche of rock the main river received a new tributary of flaming oil, and the vertical wall of the valley another slow banner of flame curling up to the vacant blue a mile above the crumbling rim, until

the whole three hundred mile circumference of precipices smoked and flared like the wall of a volcano.

The destruction was cumulative; each new outburst of flaming oil engendered another, more deeply hidden in the heart of the rock, to rip apart and pulverize a huger sector of the mountain barrier. At each new explosion the rolling seas of fire surged farther toward the narrowing island of unconsumed green in the centre of the valley, where three human beings, reinforced by multitudes of scurrying insects, the last living animals in all that inferno, silently calculated the hour of their death.

Such, in brief, was the history of the first six days after James kindled his inextinguishable fire. In the first half hour, Vartan and his two companions abandoned hope. And yet, on the afternoon of the seventh day they were still alive and unharmed, quietly determined to obey their ineradicable instinct for survival to the last.

Only Jamieson's coolheaded directions had saved them from death in the first half hour. Barely had they quitted the chamber of the first marsh, where they had met James, than the floor heaved up, and the marsh was vaporized instantly in the sudden upgush of a sea of fire. Jamieson alone knew a way to the upper caves, the habitual living quarters of the less deformed inhabitants of the valley. He retraced without a single false step the tortuous way by which the guards had led him down from the upper caves to James' forbidden garden. Jamieson had the born detective's genius for remembering infallibly faces or localities once seen.

The terrified inhabitants were already streaming into the dry caverns, familiar homes and supposed havens of safety, when the three reached the upper caverns on their way to an exit to the valley.

In vain did Vartan and Marjorie, by all the acting at their command, seek to warn the fleeing wretches of their impending destruction. Stunned and bewildered, the hapless deformities huddled together in the caves they deemed safe, until a sudden inrush of carbon monoxide gas from new fissures in the rock mercifully asphyxiated them before the flame took their bodies. Only Jamieson seemed impatient of these delays; to him it was a foregone conclusion that the last inhabitant would prefer death in Eden to the slim chance of an untried life elsewhere.

On reaching the exit on the face of the cliff overlooking the

valley, they saw, as far as vision could reach, the whole panic-stricken population streaming toward the cliff and imagined safety. It was useless to warn those already in the caves, by gesture and action, to flee for their lives. They were not to be persuaded. Abandoning the stunned wretches to the fate they seemed voluntarily to prefer, the three made their way down the face of the cliff to the valley. Reaching the bottom, they fled toward the centre of the valley, to be as far as possible from the precipices which, Vartan foresaw, must soon begin to crumble or be hurled violently down on the valley floor as pockets of pent up gas and oil exploded.

For the first twenty four hours their flight was a dazed nightmare of instinctive running till they dropped, only to stagger to their feet when they were rested, and reel on again toward the narrowing zone of comparative safety in the centre of the valley.

They felt no hunger in their urgency to survive. As the sultry heat rose almost beyond endurance, they slaked their parched throats with the tasteless berries which Marjorie's guide had shown her, not daring to kneel and drink from any of the numerous pools in the fields. In the terrific heat as one blazing inundation after another gushed out over the valley, grass, flowers and leaves twenty miles from the flaming precipices wilted and fell. Only the human beings resisted the onslaught of the scorching heat in their determination to live to the last moment.

Hobbling deformities, their blistered faces blank with terror, blundered past them day and night, making their slow way back to the crumbling caves and, Vartan hoped, a merciful death by suffocation in the gases that leaked from the cracked ground before each fresh outburst of flame.

By the early morning of the second day they had reached the centre of the valley.

"We may as well camp here," Vartan said, "till the worst of it is over. Those explosions can't go on forever. You lie down, Miss Driscott, and get some sleep, while Jamieson and I forage for blue potatoes and a gas jet to cook them by. We had better not try any of the other fruits, I suppose."

They left her to sleep, and went in search of food. Like a soldier in the trenches, wearied out by incessant battle, she fell asleep immediately. When wakened, Jamieson and Vartan were piling up dozens of the huge balls of puffed 'blue potatoes' on a bare, gravelly spot some fifty feet away.

"Have you been gone long?" she called.

"About eight hours," Vartan answered. "Better have something to eat. Stay there; I'll bring it to you."

She stood up and silently contemplated the smoking girdle of fire which hemmed them in. Since she had fallen asleep, a dozen new torrents of flaming oil had burst from the cliffs, some of them fifty miles from the initial conflagration, and the deltas of fire had advanced at least three miles, on their ceaseless march toward the centre of the valley.

"You two lie down now and rest," she said, "while I watch."

"Watch what?" Vartan asked with a grim smile.

"For the first sign of this letting up."

Her reply was drowned in the terrific concussion of a new explosion, twenty five miles away, in the valley wall almost diametrically opposite the caves. They turned and silently waited for the flames to gush forth, knowing that there would be no cessation of the destruction until the last precipices were shattered and the whole valley was ringed with an ever advancing tide of fire. Vartan and Jamieson flung themselves on the ground without a word and were instantly asleep.

So it went for six and a half days. On the afternoon of the seventh, their island in the sea of fire had narrowed to a tiny spot less than five miles across. Another day, they knew, must end it all. They would not see the end. Long before the first surge of flames swept over the withered grass of their refuge, they would have been suffocated in the furnace heat. Even now each labored breath was an agony, and their fast diminishing store of red berries, which all three had feverishly gathered as the fires crept ever closer upon them, failed to assuage their intolerable thirst. The thick black soot from a thousand raging hells streamed steadily upward on the still air, shutting off completely their last sight of the valley wall. The precipices had long since crumbled in avalanches of flaming stone, and only an occasional detonation, followed by a distant rumble, warned them that unexploded reservoirs of oil and gas must still exist beneath the valley floor.

At any moment the fires might find their way through the maze of subterranean galleries to these vaster deposits, and hurl the whole valley flaming onto the surrounding mountains. They could only pray that they might not live to experience the awful certainty of that last moment of full consciousness when they,

lifted with the heaving earth, should know for one second all the eternity of fear in a violent death.

"Let us get some sleep," Vartan panted.

They knew what he meant. Better to die in a troubled dream than to fight, choking and conscious, to the last.

"Goodnight," Jamieson said, composing himself to rest.

"Goodnight," Vartan replied. "This has been worth a long sleep, and we've earned it. Miss Driscott? Why not try to join us?"

"I'm listening," she gasped. "Do you hear anything?"

Vartan sat up.

"Only the rustle of flames," he said, and paused, listening with every nerve. "Am I going mad?" he muttered.

"No!" she cried, leaping to her feet. "I see them!"

22

THE INSPECTOR'S THEORY

ALTHOUGH SHANE WAS IMPETUOUS BY TEMPERAment, he could keep cool enough in a real crisis. And now, he realized when Brassey had taken his hurried departure to confer with the Brathwaites, was the crucial time of his life to show what he was made of. Grasping his two canes, he hobbled after his chief to the conference. His reasonable scheme had crystallized in a flash. He must now convince Brassey that the moment had come to spend money without stint to save three human lives. Vartan, the man he adored, and Marjorie, the girl he hoped might some day love him, were cut off from civilization in a desperate venture that not the hardiest explorers could hope to bring to success.

Not dreaming of the desperate plight in which his friends actually were at the moment, Shane, nevertheless, guided by the irrefutable logic of events, acted in the one way which could be of any practical value.

The three, he reasoned, had advanced into a wilderness, where food was all but unobtainable, with nothing but their packs. Therefore they must now be on the verge of starvation, if indeed they had not already perished. The one thing that mattered for the moment was to get help to them immediately.

He found his friends in a deadlock. They had agreed on principles in the first three minutes, but so far had seen no possible way of materializing their common agreement into action. Speed

alone would count. But how was speed possible over the most forbidding mountain barrier in the world? Shane had mentally recalled every incident of the expedition as he himself had participated in it, from its start at Brassey House to its end for him, when he broke his ankles and was carried back to Srinagar. With crystal distinctness one apparently trivial incident flashed upon his mind. He saw before him once more the ruined garden in which he, Marjorie and Vartan had read the first installment of Charles Brassey's charge to them, and again he visioned a blue chasm in the mountains, and heard once more the distant drone of the mail plane. A fragment of a forgotten conversation rang in his ears.

"Progress"—from Vartan.

"Yes, damn it!"—from himself.

Within fifteen minutes the details of the proposed rescue expedition were on the table. It remained only to put them into execution. Luckily the government surveyor at the mountain outpost had taken pains to learn, as accurately as he could from the porters the approximate location of the rocky defile with the hot springs where they had turned back. That was the obvious place from which to start in an attempt to overtake the three who had so rashly ventured into an unmapped wilderness.

Shane of course was fairly familiar with Vartan's map of the Marsden-Enright expedition, and he was aware of Vartan's intention of proceeding first to the rich fossil beds. Putting together the porters' information and what he recalled of Vartan's map, Shane drew the easy inference that Vartan had gone ahead confidently over a presumed short cut to the fossil beds. High-powered planes, with expert pilots and mechanics, could cover in a matter of hours the arduous route which it would take men on foot months to traverse. The planes must be fuelled to capacity, in order to permit of safe return in the event of failure to locate the lost explorers on a first scouting expedition, or to fly on with the rescued to civilization should they be happily discovered.

Thus far it was merely a rather straightforward problem of a dash over the mountain passes by skilled aviators. But where could the latter be found? Brassey took the situation in hand.

"Get Inspector Ransome on the telephone, please," he requested of the elder Brathwaite.

"Who?"

"Inspector Ransome of Scotland Yard. Oh, yes; I forgot for the moment. He is J. B. Smith here. Never mind why. Ask for Mr. Smith at the Inn."

Ransome joined them in ten minutes. Without a word he listened closely to Shane's bald recital of the facts. When Shane finished, Ransome reached for the telephone.

"The planes will be here in two hours," he said. Over the the telephone he asked for long distance. To the high official at the far end, he gave his name, stated the facts, and added that the matter was one of extreme urgency, not only for the lost explorers, but more particularly for the Government of India. The official listened. He knew who Ransome was, and he also knew that when the Inspector said a case was urgent, it was. He had frequently had dealings at second hand through Jamieson, his own Chief of the Secret Service, with Scotland Yard and Inspector Ransome.

"The planes will be at Srinagar in two hours," he answered. "How many do you need?"

"Make it five, in case of emergencies. Your best long-distance army planes and your most capable crews."

"They will be there. Goodbye."

Less than the promised two hours later, five reconnaissance planes roared down the pass, giving the quiet little town of Srinagar its first excitement in a month. Half an hour later they were soaring toward the seemingly impenetrable barrier behind the town, well on their way to the unknown.

Over Brassey's protests, Shane had been lifted into the first plane—the leader. It was necessary, he said, that he go with the aviators, as he alone had some knowledge, however sketchy, of Vartan's map and of his leader's intentions.

The search proved easier than they had anticipated. The mountain defile where the three had gone on alone was easily found. Reaching it, the fliers saw what they mistook for a terrific volcanic eruption directly ahead of them. The leader was about to turn back, when Shane advised him to go forward and see what, if anything but a huge cauldron of molten lava, lay behind the streaming pillars of crimson fire and dense soot.

"That wasn't there when the porters turned back," he explained. "It must have burst out recently. For all we know, our friends may have been trapped by the eruption. Better keep on, if you can get above the heat."

They surmounted the pillars of fire, although it seemed at every instant as if the tanks must explode. Once over the barrier of fire, they had but small choice in the matter of searching. If any human beings were still alive in that inferno, they must be marooned on the last island of scorched grass, less than five miles across, almost in the exact centre of the flaming ellipse. The planes descended to the two hundred foot level, and began methodically circling the island in ever narrowing orbits until at last, when they had all but decided that their search was futile, Shane spied the three frantic figures signalling through the smoke. The grass and shrubs on the rim of the island had already burst into flame. Only three of the planes risked the easy landing; the other two stayed aloft, as a reserve in case of accidents.

Shane's was the first down. Marjorie, naturally, was the first whom the aviators tried to rescue. But she refused.

"My life is of no consequence," she gasped, "beside the danger. Oh," she burst out, "don't ask me to explain. This may all be a dying dream. Are you Mr. Shane, or am I out of my mind?"

"I'm Shane. What do you want me to do?"

"Take charge of Jamieson."

"Jamieson?" he repeated. "There is no man by that name with you."

"There is!" she insisted. "Don't doubt. We must go before the fire makes it impossible for the planes to rise. Have you a revolver?"

"No. Perhaps the pilot has. Ask him."

The pilot was armed. On Marjorie's frantic appeal he strode back to the plane and slipped his automatic into Shane's hand.

"She seems to know what she is talking about. Is that the man you are to take?"

"Yes!" Shane shouted. He had seen William Arbold, his spying old White Horse of Brassey House.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he demanded when Jamieson was hustled up to the plane by the pilot.

"Keeping an eye on your friends," Jamieson retorted coolly. "Allow me to introduce myself. I am Alfred Jamieson, Chief of the India Secret Service."

"Climb in!" the pilot ordered, shoving Jamieson before him.

"Wait for the others," Shane implored.

"They'll be taken care of. Ever hear about carrying all your eggs in one basket? There goes number two now with the other man. Number three is off with the woman. Sit tight. We're off."

When the five planes left Srinagar, Ransome and Brassey walked back together toward the inn.

"Charles," said Ransome, "let us go for a long walk before dinner. I have something to tell you before those planes return."

"I shall be delighted, John," Brassey assented. "That is, if I can think of anything but the awful thing I have done to poor Marjorie. She should never have gone. But she did plead so to be allowed to go as observer that I didn't have the heart to refuse her after all the six years of her faithful, intelligent work at Brassey House."

"Don't worry, Charles. These men who have gone to look for her are the very cream of what is left of the British Air Force in India. With Shane along as guide, they will surely find our three. And Vartan, we know, is an explorer of the first rank. Would he lead the others into certain death? Not he. The party may be in desperate straits, but they are still going forward. Buck up, Charles."

"I'll try," Brassey promised. "But I'll never sleep again till I see those three back, safe and sound."

"You will, before long," Ransome assured him. "What I wanted to talk about now is something different. I suspect, Charles, you think I have messed this case. Perhaps I have, but I rather think not. At any time in the past eight or ten years, our men might easily have trapped one or more of the minor spies who have infested Brassey House. And what would it have gained for us if we had? Nothing, precisely nothing. These small sneak spies do not even know who their real employers are. To catch one, and promise him immunity for turning State's evidence, would get us nowhere. The man—or woman—would merely betray his or her immediate superior, who in turn might be induced to give away the nebulous authority next higher in the scale, and so it would go. At each step, the difficulty of tracing the clue would multiply by at least a hundred."

"I see that it would be impossible," Brassey agreed readily.

"It would be worse than impossible, Charles. Each false move on our parts would only make the enemy bolder."

"Who is the enemy?" Charles demanded.

"On my word of honor, Charles, I have no definite idea, except one. He is not a private criminal. Nor is he employed by dishonest competitors with only limited funds at their disposal. That, to my mind, is the most puzzling feature of the whole case. And it always has been, until recently. We are fighting an organization of at least national scope. Why? There, I confess, I am completely at sea. What possible motive can our enemies have for trying to rediscover the origin of poor James' spores? You have guessed, of course, that such is their ultimate object?"

"Long ago," Charles acknowledged ruefully. "But, as you ask, why? Even if they do succeed in tapping the true source of those remarkable flowers, our enemies would never dare to put them on the trade. The theft would be too brazen, too easily traced."

"Would it?" Ransome objected. "Suppose some firm in Holland —the great competitor of England in the plant business—does actually put out a thousand new varieties next fall. What can you do, although you are morally certain that they have been stolen from you? Indirectly lifted, of course. Could you go to court and swear that these new varieties were identical with some that you had already grown, but not propagated, from your brother's seeds?"

"I suppose not," Brassey admitted, seeing the obvious point. "But, John, do you really imagine commercial rivalry is at the bottom of all these persecutions?"

"Not for a moment," Ransome asserted positively. "And, what is more, I saw, almost from the first, that some deeper motive is under the queer actions of our enemies. But, as I said, I cannot for the very life of me imagine what it may be. For the moment I am content to concentrate on catching the higher ups, and finding out what is at the bottom of it all. I am not merely trying to excuse my seeming delays when I tell you that I have *deliberately* let the small fry go. I did so from convictions and policy. Some day, I knew, one of these underlings would overstep the mark of caution, and put the main clue in my hand."

"And one of these inferiors has done so?" Brassey asked dubiously.

"Yes," Ransome declared. "Miss West, in rashly—if some-

what humanly—cabling me that I was a fathead, has delivered at least one of the men at the top into my hands. I do not care tuppence where Miss West is now, or what she is doing, or where she may turn up in the future. She is of no importance whatever in this case."

"But," Brassey protested, "you told me the other day that she had come to you on the great Jamieson's personal recommendation."

"Precisely," Ransome snapped. "On the great Jamieson's unqualified recommendation. Miss West has gone wrong. She acknowledges it herself. Like the incompetent she is, she goes out of her way to tell me, with an insult, that she is on the enemy's side. What is the obvious inference?"

"That not only Miss West, but also the great Jamieson is not to be trusted," Brassey answered.

"That, I admit," Ransome replied, "is the most obvious conclusion. But it is not the only one. In a case of this difficulty, one cannot jump at the first way out. Jamieson, as I see him, may be one of three things. First, he himself may actually be in the employ of the men above, and know what he is. If so, he is a scoundrel of the first water. Second, he may have been duped by the enemy into planting Miss West at Scotland Yard to work on your case. In that event, Jamieson, if he is any good at all, should be able easily to trace the fatal connections clear back to their source. Third, Jamieson may be, after all, rather stupid—so dense in fact, that he has fallen an easy victim to a comparative amateur like Miss West. If this is so, the India Secret Service will have no further use for him. Nor will I."

"Which do you favor, John?"

"At present my mind is quite open. I shall not force an opinion until I see Jamieson."

"But my dear John," Brassey protested, "Arbold—your Jamieson—disappeared from our laboratories with Miss West, who has proved herself not only foolish but dishonest."

"Certainly. She, not Jamieson, stole the slides."

"But why, if what you say is true, did Jamieson follow her?"

Ransome laughed goodnaturedly. "Just think," he said, "of what had happened. Jamieson's little arrangement for keeping an eye and an ear on your employees had been discovered. You remember, of course, that our young friend Vartan impetuously revealed the dictaphone. Could Jamieson have

stayed longer with you? It would all have had to come out that he was an agent of Scotland Yard, and his usefulness to you, no less than to us, would have been destroyed. There was one thing to be done, and only one—get him out of London at once. This I did immediately.

"The apparent disaster merely hastened matters a day or two. I had intended from the very beginning that Jamieson should accompany your expedition as my observer, not as yours. With him following events in the field, I felt confident of learning at last who our enemies are, and what they hope to gain. If your Arbold—my Jamieson—had not been compelled by circumstances to sever his connections with Brassey House so suddenly, he would have resigned the evening before Vartan and Shane sailed for Bombay. By going overland to Brindisi he beat your men by several days. I had already made the necessary arrangements with Brathwaites' to employ the headman whom I should recommend, without telling them, of course, of my true object. I merely said that I was doing this at your request."

"Well!"

"Now, Charles, don't be annoyed. Would I interfere with your methods of marketing plants and seeds? You know I would have more sense."

"I see," said Brassey. "Every man master of his own trade. However," he continued gravely, "may I ask whether your agents ever discovered a tangible clue in all the years they were at Brassey House? Jamieson, remember, was in my employ for ten years."

"They did," Ransome asserted. "Or rather, Jamieson did. Miss West also contributed. I will say this for Miss West," he continued, "she never made the mistake of attempting to block any of Arbold's investigations, but cooperated most efficiently with him in trying to make the suspect betray herself."

Brassey stared at his friend. "Herself?" he echoed. "You mean that one of the women of my staff may be the criminal?"

"Why not? Miss West deceived you. Now," he went on soberly, laying a hand on Brassey's arm, "don't be offended, old chap, at what I am going to say. Jamieson tried for the whole six years that Miss Driscott was at Brassey House to make her betray who and what she is."

"But I don't understand," Brassey muttered in bewilderment.

"Miss Driscott came to us from one of the great London dailies. Her recommendations were unimpeachable."

"Like Miss West's," Ransome reminded him.

Brassey halted and faced his friend.

"John," he declared, "if it is the last thing I say, Marjorie is innocent."

"It is not yet a question of her guilt or innocence," Ransome said slowly. "May I ask you, has Miss Driscott always impressed you as being what she represented herself to be, neither more nor less?"

"I don't understand, John," Brassey faltered.

"Let me put it concretely. Is she of English birth?"

"Of course. She received most of her education at a first rate girls' school in Kensington. The botany she needed for our business she picked up readily in the first two years with us. She had taken the usual high grade courses in the sciences that are offered at schools of the calibre she attended."

"She was in Kensington two years," Ransome mused. "We checked that. And she entered as the ward of a physician in the Midlands. Unfortunately, however, the physician had died before we began our investigation of him, and his few living relatives seemed to have vanished—to America, we learned. Has it ever struck you," he asked quietly, "that Miss Driscott is five or six years older than she admits?"

"What of it?" Brassey demanded. "I hold nothing against a girl who wishes to appear a little younger than she is."

"Nor do I, Charles. But, consider this. That exclusive Kensington school does not let a pupil remain as a pupil a day after she is eighteen years of age. No wonder Miss Driscott made a brilliant record, particularly in English and the biological sciences. She was twenty three years of age when she entered, to take the last two years of work. I acknowledge that she is of unusual intelligence. Don't you?"

Brassey nodded emphatically.

"Well, what would such a young woman do in her higher school work if she were already educated when she began the last more difficult stage? I tell you, Charles, Marjorie Driscott was highly educated before she ever entered that Kensington school. She went there merely to gain a foothold on English manners and customs that would finally land her, without the least suspicion,

as your publicity agent and confidential secretary. When she applied, you couldn't resist her. Nor could I have done so, when she proved that not only was she a skilled journalist, but an extremely intelligent young woman with an amateur's love for botany in all of its branches. Miss Driscott, when she applied for your position, was a highly trained girl in more senses than one."

Charles suddenly sat down on a heap of gravel by the roadside.

"If what you say is true," he groaned, "she has deceived me completely. But," he added defiantly, "I stick to what I said. Marjorie is innocent."

"Until proved guilty," Ransome gravely concurred. "Only of what I have told you. She is not English by birth, and she is playing a part."

"What part?" Brassey whispered.

"As in Jamieson's case, so in Miss Driscott's. Only by keeping an entirely unbiased mind can I hope to make progress. I hold no hypothesis whatever concerning her motives."

"Are you sure," Brassey asked, clutching at a slender thread, "that she is not English?"

"Positively. The man whom I consider one of the greatest living experts on human speech, convinced himself in a month that Miss Driscott's native tongue—the language she learned as a baby—was not English, although closely allied to it. The quality of certain vowel sounds betrayed her to an expert,where they would have passed unnoticed by even a close ordinary observer. English must also have been spoken in her home, as it is in some countries of continental Europe. But her tongue had first mastered the broader, softer pronunciation of those vowels and dipthongs."

"What was her native language?" Brassey demanded, fearing the answer.

"Dutch."

"And who is this expert on whom you rely?"

"Jamieson. In his work with the India Secret Service he has made a minutely scientific study of human speech, in order to overcome the slight, almost imperceptible flaws on his own pronunciation of difficult words in a score or more of the native Indian dialects. As I said, Jamieson's verdict on a technical matter of this kind is beyond dispute. You must accept this as a fact, Charles. Jamieson, in his other capacity as a private citizen, has

been elected to some of the most exclusive linguistic academies in the world."

"I suppose I must," Brassey sighed unhappily. "But tell me, John, your agents never saw any trace of actual dishonesty in Marjorie's conduct at our laboratories?"

For a fraction of a second Ransome hesitated. "Only this," he admitted reluctantly. "We learned conclusively that Miss Driscott's real object at Brassey House was to discover, if possible, the origin of those spores your brother sent you."

"Then that puts her in the same class as the rest of the spies," Brassey acknowledged hopelessly. "Poor Marjorie! But," he reiterated defiantly, "I still believe she is innocent, no matter what she has done."

"So do I, Charles, until we have proof beyond all question. I know it is a hard thing to say,"he continued,"but in my profession we cannot believe in the innocence of anyone until it is established. I neither condemn nor approve her conduct. Miss Driscott, at this moment, is no more to me than is Alfred Jamieson. For all I know," he continued frankly, "they may be working together, although I consider this as wildly improbable. Still, it is no more absurd than it would be to condemn or acquit either of them without further evidence. And, I may say," he concluded, "if Jamieson is a fool, then I am bitterly disappointed in him."

For long Brassey did not reply. At last, looking up into his friend's anxious face, he put his perplexed question.

"When you said that Vartan was your man, you meant that he would discover what Marjorie is really doing?"

"Not quite so strong as that, Charles. It will take an expert in human nature to decipher our charming friend. No; what I meant was this. The ordinary young man would have fallen an easy victim to Miss Driscott's obvious attractions. Not so, Vartan. When he cabled, 'Driscott reports slides found. True?' he was not taking her word for anything. When I advised you to cable a plain 'No' in reply, I knew well what I was doing.

"Whether Miss Driscott was or was not intentionally dishonest in that little episode, is of no importance. She may have been deluded by some message from our enemies. All I cared about was the opportunity it gave me of putting Vartan on his mettle. After a flat denial like that of one of her stories, would he be likely to believe the next? Mind," he added, "I do not for a moment assert

that Marjorie did not receive such a lying message from our enemies. The cabled news that Shane's slides had been found might well have been sent as a trap for her. I shouldn't be a bit surprised to learn that Jamieson was responsible for it. However, only time will show. I'm counting on that unimpressionable young chap Vartan to tell us something. Well, Charles, it's getting late. Shall we stroll back to the inn and have dinner?"

"I suppose so," Brassey muttered, "although I doubt whether I shall ever enjoy another meal until those three are found."

"Ah!" Ransome exclaimed. "That's better. You said 'until'. So you are beginning to believe with me that our friends will be found sooner or later. Those boys in the planes are some of the best pilots in India. They'll find our three."

While Brassey and Ransome tried to sleep that night, the planes were soaring high over the Karakorum passes, intent on their search for the chasm with the hot springs. Their descent into the inferno early the next day, and their subsequent escape with the three refugees, were no more nerve-trying than the sleepless, foodless watch which Brassey and Ransome maintained after their first futile endeavor to await the outcome calmly. Although both knew that their fretting could do no good, they sat for hours together in uneasy silence, or paced the lanes of the valley in moody thought for hours on end without a word. Neither could touch the food he tried to eat, and both early realized that sleep would be an impossibility until the planes were heard from.

All went well with the returning planes until the moment when the leader began soaring up toward the great pass, eighteen thousand feet high, in the barrier range between them and the first, far beginnings of civilization. The engine began missing, and the pilot glanced anxiously down in the moonlight to see what, if anything, lay beneath him. A saddle-shaped depression of smooth, deep snow, gave him courage. If he must land, he probably would not kill himself and his passengers. The engine continued to miss. Glancing back, the pilot saw Shane nodding, half frozen and almost asleep. At his feet a dark, huddled figure was groping about where he had no legitimate business. To waken Shane, the pilot took a sudden dive and instantly zoomed up again. Shane roused from his doze. In a flash he suspected what was happening. Old White Horse was rummaging about in the hope of finding something he could tamper with to disable the plane

and force the pilot to come down on the one safe landing they had as yet flown over. Reaching down, he jerked the shaking man into a sitting posture.

Conversation was impossible in the roar of the propeller. Nevertheless Jamieson contrived to give an excellent imitation—if indeed it was not real—of a man completely unnerved by his first airplane ride, and determined at all costs to get back to solid earth while the opportunity was reasonably good.

Shane did not argue. Professing to accept old Horse Face's cowardice at its alleged value, he roughly shoved him into a sitting posture at a safe distance from temptation. Jamieson, however, was so badly out of his head that he refused this exhibition of reason and dropped to the floor.

Shane almost lost his temper. He was even moved to exhibit the pistol which the pilot had lent him. This argument told, almost too effectively. Jamieson reached into his clothes for his own pistol. To all appearances he was clean out of his head with fright. Shane left no doubt of his own intention. Taking careful aim, he neatly drilled a small hole through the fuselage at Jamieson's feet. Jamieson saw the point. His own hands grasped his shaking knees in full view of all spectators. Thereafter Shane dozed no more. Only when the freezing dawn broke did he permit the gibbering man at his feet to crawl out and try to warm his stiff arms in the frosty sunlight.

"If that man's as great a fool and as big a coward as he pretended to be," Shane muttered to himself, "I'm twice everything that he is. All right, Marjorie; I'll take care of Jamieson for you."

23

THE MOTIVE

THE WHOLE POPULATION OF SRINAGAR TURNED out to greet the planes as they whirred and droned down the pass, but only two of the crowd were permitted to approach them when they landed. Ransome had used all his police skill, without actually betraying his identity, to induce the officials of the sleepy little town to make the necessary arrangements for holding back the curious.

Shane was lifted out first. Brassey, thoughtful as ever, had brought the lame man's walking sticks.

"You take charge of Shane, will you?" he asked Ransome. "I must see Marjorie."

She was the next on the ground. Staggering slightly in the natural effort to regain her ground legs, she hurried over to Shane.

"Is he with you?"

"Who?"

"Jamieson."

"Of course. He lost his head and might have jumped out, if I hadn't persuaded him not to, but here he is. All whole, as you see. Is he very precious to you, Marjorie?"

"Infinitely. Don't let him out of your sight for an instant. I'll tell you later why. Don't say anything to Mr. Brassey yet. Here he comes."

Overcome by exhaustion, she all but fell into Brassey's arms.

"There, there," he soothed. "You will be all right after a nice

hot bath, a glass or two of warm milk, and a long sleep. Everything is ready. Don't try to tell me now. Wait till tomorrow."

"I can't!" she cried. "This must all be settled now. Oh, can't you understand? I'm not out of my head. Things are desperate, desperate, I tell you! We have almost won, but we may lose it all at the last moment through carelessness. Have you some brandy—anything?"

"John!" Brassey called. "Where are the stimulants?"

"Here," Ransome answered, hastening toward them. "All ready." He poured her a sizable drink in the flask cup and handed it to her. While she was drinking, Vartan joined the group. "Have one?" Ransome invited.

"No, thanks. All I want is a gallon of water. Nothing to drink for days but dried berries. Better give her some water too."

Somehow they managed to make their way through the crowd to the waiting cars, leaving the disappointed populace to wreak its enthusiasm on the hapless aviators. Ransome contrived to sit in the rear seat of the first car, alone with Jamieson and Shane, while Marjorie, Brassey and Vartan were whisked off in the second.

"Everything satisfactory, Jamieson?" Ransome ventured as they shot off.

"Quite," Jamieson snapped. "We found where James Brassey got his spores. James is dead and the place will burn for the next thousand years."

"James is dead, you say? Poor Charles will be relieved."

"Not when he hears the story." In a few harsh sentences he outlined the essential facts of their stay in the caves. "You will have to tell him. I can't."

"Very well. I suppose I must; I'm his oldest friend. Poor Charles!"

"Yes. Poor Charles. And Poor James. Both of them mad as hatters."

"Charles is the sanest man I ever knew," Ransome asserted quietly. "You are making a mistake, Jamieson."

"Charles sane?" Jamieson scoffed. "Then why does he let a third rate spy like Miss Driscott turn him inside out?"

Shane took his first part in the conversation.

"Mr. Jamieson, or Mr. Arbold, or whatever your right name is, let me remind you that I have a pistol in my pocket."

"You won't use it," Jamieson sneered.

"I will, Mr. Arbold. I have always disliked you. Intensely. If you make another slighting remark about Miss Driscott, this automatic in my pocket will go off by itself and fill your fat thigh full of slugs. You will be hurt, not killed. Can I help the damned thing going off on this jolting excuse for a road? Now, can I, Mr. Ransome?"

Ransome smiled. "I think the road will be smoother from now on." He turned to Jamieson. "You have found out why our enemies were so anxious to get hold of James Brassey's seeds—or to learn where they came from?"

"No," Jamieson admitted sourly. "It is all as crazy a puzzle as it ever was. We saw the flowers—thousands of acres of them. For all I know, any one of those varieties might be worth a fortune to a seedgrower. But, even if so, I can't see that mere trade rivalry would go to the lengths, and spend the time and money, that our enemies have."

"So we are still at the beginning of things?" Ransome quizzed with an air of disappointment.

"Except that we did find the source and cut off the possible supply. Whoever wants those seeds so badly won't find any. The last of them burned up days ago."

"Well," Ransome sighed, "that is something. "We probably shan't be bothered by spies again at Brassey House. Hadn't we better publish a brief statement of the wholesale and final destruction of all those much-sought spores?"

"I think we might as well," Jamieson agreed. "I'm sick to death of this whole slow, irritating case. Thank God I can go back to my real work tomorrow. This ends the Brassey case. Ten mortal years of my life wasted on it."

"We must first investigate Charles Brassey's agents before we finally close up the docket," Ransome reminded him. "It's all right, Mr. Shane. The road is still smooth. I was not alluding to your friend." He resumed his quizzing of Jamieson. "I take it that you are rather disappointed with the outcome of your ten years at Brassey House?"

"Who wouldn't be, in my situation?" Jamieson flared. "The work of my department handed over to subordinates for ten dreary years of futility? When I get back into the harness, I shall find that some nincompoop I never knew has stepped into my shoes."

"You'll feel better," Ransome assured him goodhumoredly, "after a warm bath and a meal fit for an epicure. Here we are. Your room is ready; the water will be in the tub when you get there, and the table all set for action when you're dry. I'll ask them to send you up a steaming hot toddy. Hurry."

"Hold on a second," Shane ordered, hobbling after the retreating Jamieson. "I need a bath too." He went up to the great chief of the India secret service and whispered one short command in his ear.

"Tell Ransome you want dinner at once, or I'll blow your leg off."

Ransome stood watching the pair intently. Jamieson's face betrayed the natural alarm of a man arguing with a dangerous lunatic; Shane's was grim with a devil-may-care determination. Shane gave the answer to his own ultimatum.

"Mr. Arbold says he would like a good stiff drink at once in the dining room. He doesn't want to bathe and change till after dinner."

"Of course," Ransome assented readily, with a questioning, private glance at Jamieson. The latter nodded, with a peculiar significance. As plainly as if he had spoken, he told Ransome that it would be best to humor this wild Irish-American whose 'girl' he had unwittingly insulted.

In the private dining room which had been prepared for them, the trio sat sipping drinks till Marjorie, Charles and Vartan joined them some forty minutes later. The thoughtful Charles had made arrangements for suitable raiment for Marjorie. Pale and shaky, but otherwise looking like any young woman about to sit down to a formal dinner, she took the place which Charles indicated on his right. As she took her seat, she glanced at Jamieson.

"I see you did not bother to change," she remarked, with a smile of warm appreciation, not at Jamieson, but at Shane. "You were sensible, although I did enjoy warm water after all the weeks of cold."

"Mr. Jamieson was too hungry and too tired to change before dinner," Shane elucidated. "At least that is what he made me believe without undue persuasion." He turned to Jamieson with a devilish grin.

"Try another of these cocktails, Mr. Arbold? They are concocted in our own distilleries, and Miss Driscott recommends

them particularly. She says you will find them much superior to the trade article."

Jamieson laughed in high good humor.

"Excellent," he said. "With training you might make a detective yourself. Don't you think so, Mr. Vartan?"

"No," said Vartan shortly. "And, what is more, I don't believe you would either, no matter how much training you got."

"Still mourning the lost Ali Baba?" Jamieson mocked. "It was a shame to pull the wool over your eyes like that. Miss Driscott never swallowed me whole as you did."

Ransome and Brassey followed this apparently trivial banter with rigid attention. What would Marjorie answer?

"I have swallowed you whole from the first day I went to work at Brassey House over six years ago," she replied coolly, eyeing Jamieson with a slight stare which just concealed her dislike. "Ah, thank Heaven," she broke off, "here comes solid food at last. May I never see fruit or vegetables again as long as I live."

The dinner passed in absorbing tales of adventure, as first Vartan, then Marjorie, humorously backed by the late Ali Baba, recounted—in heightened colors, perhaps—the days of their hopes and fears in the mountains and caves. Only when Jamieson seemed about to let slip some incautious reference to James did the others stiffen and warn him with a glance. To Brassey's eager questions as to the cause of the final disaster, they replied that an 'accident' had kindled the spiral river, and plunged once more headlong into their narrative. But, warned by an instinct which had fed for years on the secrecy of his brother's living death, Charles sensed the shape of the truth, if not its actual form and color. At last the adventures were all told, and only the truth behind their strange pattern remained unrevealed. Charles glanced at the heap of cigarette stubs on the tray before him, and turned appealingly to Marjorie.

"Is that all?" he asked.

She dismissed the others with a look which they could not misinterpret.

"We will join you in a moment," she said. "I want to give Mr. Brassey something I brought back for him."

Vartan and Jamieson rose immediately. Shane lingered, as if in doubt. Marjorie saw. Her slight nod told him to leave.

"I'll look out for Mr. Jamieson," he promised. "Our friend Vartan is till sore about that jam tart old Horse Face tried to make him eat."

"Thank you," she murmured, with a look which he read.

"Don't worry," Shane replied. Although he did not tap his pistol pocket, he almost did.

"We shall be up in my sitting room," Ransome announced. "Don't be too long. It is nice and cozy up there. I've got a roaring log fire going."

When the door closed behind them, Marjorie tiptoed to it, and turned the catch. Then, coming back to the table, she sat down. Drawing her chair close to Brassey's, she looked into his white, strained face and took both of his hands in her own. Then she told him.

Charles pushed back his chair.

"Poor James. If I had only known."

"It is better as it was. James gave his life to save England, and probably the world. Those spores can cross oceans."

"Is there more?" he asked in a dull voice.

"Yes. James was not dreaming when he spoke of the 'seeds of madness'. Shall we go upstairs and join the others? They must hear it too."

"Tell me," he said, pausing at the door and facing her. "Have you deceived me?"

"About your brother's death? No."

"I did not mean that."

She looked into his eyes and read the tortured question.

"Yes," she said. "I have deceived you from the first day I entered Brassey House."

Brassey groaned. "James. Poor James. I would have given my own life to have saved yours. But it is better as it is. You did not die in the dark, in cold and filth and misery. Oh, what lies!"

His fingers fumbled for the catch. She caught the groping hand in hers.

"You are happy," she said, "in spite of what I have told you. Don't you know that James was repaid in those last moments for all his suffering? You would have given your own life to save his. If you could have made misery like his impossible by a lie, would you have lied?"

"What do you mean?"

"Would you have lied to save others from your brother's life? Not all madness is inherited, as his was."

He stared at her uncomprehendingly.

"Answer me," she said. "You understand my question. Would you?"

"Yes," he sighed.

"Then let us go upstairs. Mr. Vartan knows that I am a liar. Now I will tell him why I lied."

When they were all comfortably seated before the cheery blaze in Ransome's sitting room, with the lights low, Marjorie asked if she might be allowed to tell her story.

"I should like to explain some things that you do not know, perhaps. Of course I cannot account for everything on this strange expedition from a scientific standpoint, because I am not as well trained as some of the rest of you. But Mr. Vartan probably can help me out. Mr. Brassey, too, has theories as to the origin of these plant-animals, which Mr. Shane, I believe, shares at least partly. The spores did not originate on our earth. You are more competent than I am to discuss these questions, so I shall attend only to the human side which, perhaps, I knew better than any of you."

"I thought so," Jamieson muttered.

"Shall I go on?" Marjorie hesitated.

"Please, Miss Driscott," Ransome answered for them all. "Jamieson told me on the way here that he is still in the dark about the origin of what he and I have come to call the 'Brassey Case'. Possibly you can enlighten us?"

"I can. Please don't ask me how I know all that I am going to tell you. It will be clear enough, I hope, as I go on. Until very recently I did not guess any more than the rest of you, who these spies are who have made Mr. Brassey's life miserable for the past thirteen years. Nor do I know yet," she confessed, seeing a questioning look in Ransome's eyes, "who they are. My main purpose in 'confessing'—as Mr. Vartan might say—is to clear up this point. When I have finished, I hope it will be plain to you all who is guilty, or at least not entirely innocent.

"My story begins many years back. Let me first recall the leading dates. James Brassey left England in 1917. His brother did not begin to experiment with the spores till 1931. The first spies appeared at Brassey House in 1933 or 34. The last date is the

most important of all for my theory—as Mr. Ransome or Mr. Jamieson might say.

"You, I believe," she continued with a questioning glance at Jamieson and Ransome, "have tried to trace the spies from England. That, if you will let me say so, is where you made your greatest mistake."

"But, Miss Driscott," Ransome protested, "we had only English clues to go on."

"I am not criticizing you," she replied. "I was merely trying to point out that a solution from the English end alone is impossible. Perhaps the facts I shall now tell you will show why your sphere of investigation must be considerably enlarged if you are finally to catch the guilty.

"In the spring of 1934 an unaccountable illness suddenly broke out among the professional gardners employed by one of the largest seed-growing companies in Holland. I need not tell you the name of the company, or that of the town near which their seedgardens are located. All that is necessary for you to know, will come out as I tell the rest. Doubtless all of you are aware that Holland before the last war was one of the leading countries of the world in the propagation of bulbs, garden shrubs and flowering perennials. Its only serious rival in this hemisphere was England. The great establishment to which I referred was probably the leading garden firm in Holland, and hopes to be again, but recovery is slow.

"In England, you know, the corresponding high position is still filled by Brassey House. It was inevitable that there should be a certain amount of competition and trade rivalry between the two great firms. This rivalry, unfortunately, was not always limited to the fair play of reputable business methods."

"On our side it was," Brassey interrupted quietly. "Surely you know that, Marjorie?"

"I do," she admitted. "But, to return to the illness of which I spoke. About eighty of the gardeners, all on one particular seed farm, isolated by tulip fields from the rest, were affected. The onset of the disease was sudden, like an epidemic of influenza. Its symptoms were, first, a loss of memory; second, a partial paralysis of the legs, which, however, lasted but a day or two; and third, the last, incurable stage."

"Which was?" Jamieson prompted.

"A gradual and complete destruction of the reasoning faculties.

In short, insanity of the non-violent type, which left its victims as helpless as imbeciles. This, as I have indicated, did not develop all at once. From the first attack to the final stage took about four months."

"They recovered ultimately, of course?" Jamieson hazarded.

"No. When I stated that the last stage was incurable, I meant what I said."

"How do you know it was incurable?"

"Eight of the victims lived but six or seven months. The rest seemed to grow stronger, bodily. The eight who died were minutely dissected. It was found that numerous brain cells had been completely destroyed, and the general structure of the nerve tissue was also profoundly affected. Such a condition, according to the physicians who performed the autopsies, is beyond human aid. Their opinion was confirmed by the few victims who survived the destruction of the war, scattered in various asylums throughout Holland and Belgium. It is agreed by the authorities in charge of these asylums that these few survivors are the lowest imbeciles they have ever seen."

"All right," Jamieson said. "I accept the incurability of the disease. Please go on."

"Not to alarm people unnecessarily," she continued, "the medical authorities suppressed all news of the outbreak as far as was possible. The families of the victims of course spread the news among their immediate friends, but it was kept completely out of the press.

"Soon the physicians in charge realized that they were dealing with a disorder totally new to medical science. They appealed for help to the faculties of the great medical schools, and to the medical divisions of the leading Dutch Academies of the Sciences.

"I need not go into detail on the simple investigation which discovered the probable source of the disease. From the beginning it had been singularly localized. Only the gardeners on a particular seed farm were attacked. This farm was segregated and watched by experts. No outsiders were admitted.

"Soon three of the investigating experts became ill. They are today confined in asylums, mere lumps of vegetating life.

"This new disaster roused our biologists and medical experts as the first had not. Concentrating all their forces on the problem, they finally solved it by a quite simple process of elimination. Only

those who worked near a certain seed plot were attacked. By microscopic examination, the soil was discovered to be seething with what, at first, looked like millions of green bacteria of a novel kind. These were seized upon as a possible source of the disease.

"It soon developed that the supposed bacteria were microscopic plants of extraordinary vitality. Those who investigated them, also became ill and were sent to asylums. New investigators took up the work, with greater precautions. It began to appear that the rapidly growing spores emitted highly dispersed clouds of still smaller spores—ultramicroscopic, in fact—which were responsible for the disease. By a simple means of filtering the air from the growing plants, which I need not go into, it was proved that this invisible exhalation was indeed at the root of the evil. Further, it was shown that the exhalations consisted, as had been suspected, of an invisible dust of sub-spores that had many of the properties of a filterable virus.

"The next step was to trace the origin of these multitudes of living organisms. The botanist declared that they were not true plants, and the biologists were equally positive that they were not true animals. They compromised by calling them plant-animals.

"Where had they come from? The head of the great seed firm concerned, on being convinced of the extreme gravity of the danger, made a full confession. I alluded, when I began, to the long rivalry between this firm and Brassey House. The firm had not scrupled to bribe weak employees of Brassey House to pick up trade secrets from their superiors and sell them to the Dutch firm. In this way many valuable new varieties, that might have been issued by Brassey House first, were anticipated by their dishonest rivals.

"You guess the rest. James Brassey's remarkable seeds were wholly new in horticulture. The first experiments at Brassey House revealed this at once. After the first plant bloomed, and failed to produce seeds, one of the Dutch spies stole a pinch of spores—and sold it to the Dutch representative who had been detailed to work on him.

"With more insight, perhaps, than the experts at Brassey House, the Dutch seed growers tried to raise the new varities in natural surroundings and in full sunlight. They were sown outdoors on a carefully prepared plot of ground.

"Only one plant sprang from the stolen seeds. Not one of the other spores even germinated. The single plant grew rankly and

flowered. Then, overnight, when the men in charge least expected it, the flowers suddenly and simultaneously went to seed. Not only that, but the seed capsules had burst, evidently explosively, and dispersed their priceless seeds for perhaps a radius of fifty feet. None were discovered on the ground, although a microscopic search was made. Two days later came the first outbreak of the incurable disease.

"When the investigators found that the exhalations of the germinating spores were the true cause of the madness, they set about discovering the reason. The investigation, of course was one of great danger. In transferring a specimen of the tainted soil from one flask to another, as was frequently necessary in the experiments, there was the constant risk, in spite of all precautions, of letting some of the subtile exhalations escape.

"It was decided that one man alone should undertake this investigation, so as not to peril more minds than was necessary. Several volunteered. One was chosen by lot.

"Before beginning his work, this man assured himself that a sufficient supply of the virulent soil was in the laboratory, and then advised the sterilization of the entire source of infection. For a radius of a mile from the spot where the plant had seeded, the soil was first drenched with petrol—by volunteers who subsequently lost their sanity—and fired. Then other volunteers worked over every inch of the condemned territory with oxy-acetylene torches, till the soil was baked to brick dust for a depth of a foot. These second volunteers were more fortunate than the first. Out of twenty, only seven lost their minds. Their work finally destroyed the spores, as was conclusively proved by other volunteers who lived on the baked soil for six months. None of them became ill."

"But why," Brassey expostulated when Marjorie paused, "did not these men warn us at Brassey House?"

"They should have done so at once," she admitted. "Their slight delay was an error of judgment. They argued thus: it would be useless for Brassey House to destroy the rest of James' spores while their source was still undiscovered. The source must be found and destroyed. This, however, only on the hypothesis that the spores were indeed as virulent as the first experiments seemed to show. Scientific caution—the cold conservatism of the well-trained investigator which forbids him to express an opinion

which he cannot back with proof—was responsible for the fatal delay of three weeks. That, and the possibility of making themselves ridiculous, held back our investiagtors when they should have acted.

"They planned eventually to ask your cooperation in discovering and destroying the source of James' spores. When finally they had convinced themselves of the truth of their first experiments, it was too late to act. The mischief had been done. Some incautious biologist had let slip a vague hint of the truth. Whose ears heard it, we do not know to this day."

"Sure of that?" Jamieson demanded sharply.

"She says she is," Shane interrupted when Marjorie started to reply. "Now, Horse Face, I told you I dislike you. Shut up, unless I tell you to speak."

"Mr. Shane!" Ransome protested.

"Oh, it's all right, I know," Shane grumbled. "Only I didn't like his tone. Go ahead, Marjorie. We may take it as said that you are sure of what Arbold asked you."

"The chief of the guilty firm," Marjorie continued, "whose inspired theft had caused all the misery, swore to spend his last guilder, if necessary, to undo his folly. He instructed his agents to keep the sharpest watch on the Brassey seed laboratories."

"H'm," Jamieson grunted.

"And what did they observe, Miss Driscott?" Vartan asked significantly.

"That our intentions were already frustrated. Desperate spies, who had wormed their way into Brassey House as truck drivers, or janitors, or men of all work, were using every means known to dishonesty to steal more of the spores and to learn where James had found them. Every move they made was met by one of ours. It became a battle between us and the unknown enemy to prevent the fertile propagation of those spores and the discovery of their source. Backed by the money of our great firm, we matched their spies, man for man, and woman for woman."

"You were one of the women, I presume?" Jamieson sneered.

"Yes. But not in the earlier stages. You know perfectly well," she flashed out suddenly, "when I joined. And you also know when the spying began. Your question is silly."

"Go on, Marjorie," Brassey said softly, ignoring Jamieson's taunt. She turned to the Inspector.

"What would you say, Mr. Ransome," she demanded, a dangerous glint in her eyes, "if a man, or men, knowing the full evil of these spores, should seek to obtain more like them by dishonest means?"

"Why, Miss Driscott," Ransome smiled, "the question is quite too elementary for even such a slow-witted detective as you seem to think I am."

"That is not an answer," she objected, with delicately veiled contempt.

"If you insist," he retorted in a cold, impersonal tone. "I should say the man, or men, you describe were almost certainly actuated by evil motives."

"Their purpose might conceivably be to use those spores of madness as a new weapon of warfare?"

"It is not impossible," he admitted. "What about it, Jamieson?"

"I should say it would be a fair working hypothesis," Jamieson agreed. "Especially when we consider the apparantly unlimited sums of money that have been expended by our enemies to obtain —or try to obtain—the desired information. But," he concluded sourly, "I fail to see what these remarks have to do with Miss Driscott's very interesting and—pardon me—plausible narrative."

"Careful, White Horse," Shane admonished softly. Jamieson turned on him with a show of temper.

"You told me before that you are in love with Miss Driscott," he said with acid emphasis. "Please don't repeat yourself so often, or I shall ask Mr. Brassey to tell you to go home as a common, public, damned, impertinent young nuisance."

"Easy, Jamieson!" Ransome warned. "This is my apartment. I shall ask both of you to avoid embarrassing my guest. Miss Driscott, continue, if you please."

"You have broken my thread," she began in confusion. "Oh yes. I must go back to what that solitary investigator, chosen by lot, found in his researches. He was a member of the Haarlem Academy, not a university professor or a physician, but a great amateur who had devoted his wealth, his talents and his life to biology. It was fortunate for science that chance elected him to solve the puzzle of that madness.

"The medical reports aided him. The lesions of brain and nerve tissue that accompanied the disease went even deeper. They

persisted in the very germ plasm of the victims. And they were curiously like the degenerations of living tissue that are produced by long exposure to X-rays or to radioactive materials."

"Ah," Vartan exclaimed. "Pardon me. Go on."

"That great investigator found that the invisible spores, absorbed into the blood stream through the lung tissue, multiplied in the blood and muscles of the victim like bacteria until, having done the utmost of destruction, they warred upon themselves and expired, leaving the cells which they had attacked permanently changed.

"It was natural to ask whether the degeneration of brain and nerve was heritable. By rigidly controlled experiments on mice it was proved that the defects of brain and nervous tissue of the first tainted generation were transmitted indefinitely to the offspring for generation after generation.

"The next step was to prove that the untramicroscopic spores were indeed highly radioactive. This was the fatal turning piont of the whole investigation. To conduct the proper experiments the teeming virus, multiplying upon itself like arithmetic gone mad, had to be distributed once more over an open seed bed in the full sunlight. The experimenter wore a diver's suit, air tight, of course, and made his observations clumsily as best he could.

"The result justified his daring. He proved beyond a shadow of a doubt, that these mad plant-animal spores have the power of collecting to themselves, absorbing and storing up permanently, the radioactive emanations which stream up constantly from the surface of the earth and which, ordinarily, are dissipated into space. Just as some plants, notably beets, can extract the iron from the soil, so it was proved that the plant-animals, of all living things, can hoard the radioactive elements in their own cells. The mystery was solved. As they had anticipated, they found the solution entirely reasonable. They knew, of course, that X-rays, the emanations discharged from radium, and cosmic rays can permanently transmute one species of living plants or animals into another—a degenerated race from their pure parents, we rather presumptously think. So the final mystery found its complete and simple explanation in the undiscovered harmony of nature. But I am trespassing on Mr. Vartan's territory," she continued with a smile at his fascinated face, "and I must hurry on.

"The next, and last, act in this tragedy put an abrupt end to the play. The daring investigator who had risked his sanity lost it through a trivial accident. The new experimental plot was sterilized; a sufficient sample of the infected earth was sealed off in a glass flask for further work. The flask slipped from the experimenter's hand, and was shattered. He also became a casualty. But, thank Heaven, he lived only a little over two months after he lost his mind. It was decided to make a complete end of this dangerous work, and concentrate all of our energies on locating the source of James Brassey's seeds.

"Shortly before the last experimenter died, the Academy of Sciences in his native town received a generous gift 'for biological explorations in Central Asia'. The donor remained anonymous. Certain members of the Academy advised against accepting the money, believing it to be a clever move by the enemy to discover our plans, by foisting spies of their own on any expedition we might undertake. The majority however voted to use the money for the purpose for which it had been given. I need hardly say that all the information our agents had gained at Brassey House was used to the full in directing the expedition. Our preparations doubtless were effective, for no spies, we feel sure, accompanied the explorers, Heindricks and Van Sluys."

"What?" Vartan exclaimed. "Then you knew of the rock valley and the hot springs?"

"Yes. It was recorded on their map."

"But, Miss Driscott, you did your best to delude me into believing that the place was unknown to you."

"Why not? You distrusted me, although I did not distrust you —in the same way. I merely questioned your discretion and your ability to keep a secret. However, let that pass. Heindricks and Van Sluys returned empty handed, because they considered a descent into the valley impossible. They had no suspicion, I should say, that their goal lay just ahead of where they turned back.

"On their return, the Academy decided that it would be wisest to suppress all records and reports of the expedition until the source of the spores was discovered and sterilized. May I ask Mr. Vartan, why you went on where our men gave up?"

"I think I have told you sufficiently. The fossil beds of our

1914 expedition were beyond all rational explanation until recently. Thousands of new species were crowded into those strata, the richest ever discovered. Evolution, I guessed, had been hastened in that particular region. Not only hastened," he added emphatically, "but turned into new channels."

"The recent ray work on creating new species of insects gave you your clue?" she asked.

"Not altogether. It merely made my hypothesis of intense radiations causing sudden jumps from one species to another more reasonable. When we found those butterflies and beetles, I knew I was on the right track. The blistering water was radioactive. And, finally, those poor deformities in the valley were no doubt partly due to the intense radioactivity of their surroundings.

"Their very germ cells were permanently changed, so that they, and all of their descendents for generations, would be mere parodies of human beings. If the fire had not destroyed their valley, they would probably have continued to produce new, permanent 'sports', each one less human than its predecessor. I think," he concluded with an air of quiet satisfaction, "I can now face old Grimsby and tell him I wasn't as crazy as he said I was. And I can tell him something of more importance. All that mass of radioactive minerals is so deeply buried that it will never do another living thing any harm. Unless," he concluded with a wry smile, "some federation of scientific geniuses and moral imbeciles invents a sort of super-mining to get at it and sell the stuff for making bombs and radioactive gases to the next lunatic who wants to run the world to suit his own crazy ideas."

Like an unexpected pistol shot, Jamieson's question when Vartan finished, made more than one face go white.

"Do you suppose," he asked, "that our germ cells were affected by our stay in the valley? If any of us marries, will his or her children be freaks with four thumbs—if nothing worse?"

Vartan swallowed hard before he found his courage and an answer.

"We probably were not exposed to the radiations long enough to make any difference. It takes a long time, compared to the nine day life span of the fruit flies, to make them breed freaks by spraying them with X-rays. I think we are safe."

"But you are not sure?" Jamieson persisted.

"Of course I am," Vartan blustered, with a furtive glance at Marjorie.

In the awkward silence which ensued, Brassey sat studying Marjorie's profile.

"You have not yet told us who the investigator was who gave his own reason to discover so much about those seeds of madness."

"He was my father."

Even Jamieson had nothing to say. At last Brassey broke the hush.

"I understand. Your loss and mine have brought immunity for the world. That place is destroyed."

Marjorie roused from her revery.

"Not yet. But the sacrifices of your brother and my father shall not be wasted. Mr. Shane! Make Jamieson strip to the waist."

Ransome jumped to his feet, but made no attempt to knock the automatic from Shane's hand. Jamieson naturally refused to be bullied even by a pistol.

"Strip him!" Shane ordered Ransome. "You have not been any too polite to Miss Driscott yourself. That's it. Now the vest. Fine. Don't be afraid of the shirt. Pretty good; we're getting down to his hide. Now the undershirt. Is that what you want, Miss Driscott? That black bag affair, like a huge bologna sausage tied around his middle? Better take it off him then, while I've got him covered. Hold still, Horse Face, or I'll pepper your legs for you. Got it, Miss Driscott? All right, Horse Face, consider yourself free to froth at the mouth. Vartan and Ransome can handle you, I guess. If not, I'll shoot."

"Spores?" Ransome demanded sternly, taking the long black bag from Marjorie. "Don't curse so, you fool," he snapped at Jamieson. "There's a woman present. Now then, who are your employers?"

They grilled him for an hour without result. While Vartan and Marjorie buried the fatal spores in the glowing embers of the fireplace, and heaped fresh dry wood on the roaring fire, Ransome and Brassey questioned and cross-questioned the sweating wretch in an endeavor to make him confess. At last, unexpectedly, he broke down and cried like a child. They thought fear at the consequences of his treachery and the inevitable disgrace, professional

and personal, which must follow him through life, had unnerved him, but it was not so. Babbling incoherently that his friends must remain slaves forever, and that their last chance of total victory had been consumed before his eyes, he bade them do what they liked with him.

"Look here, Jamieson," Ransome promised, "I'll not prosecute you or any of your friends if you tell us who they are and what their motive is. If you like, I will take my oath to let you all go."

"But that is absurd, John," Brassey protested. "They may raise the devil in some more hellish way."

"No, they won't, Charles. I know my business, and so does the Indian Government. This man was—and still is, for that matter—the Chief of their Secret Service. Pretty strong evidence, I think, of some silly plot. Now then, Jamieson, who are these deluded friends of yours? Immunity for you all, if you tell. Then, perhaps, when you have shown that you are not an utter idot, you and they may have a chance to make good again in more congenial work."

Finally convinced that Ransome was to be trusted, although he himself was not, Jamieson revealed the names of the leading members of the Liberators.

"I thought so," Ransome remarked disgustedly when Jamieson finished. "Of all the silly fools—trying to go back to the good old Stone Age. If they would attend to their provinces, instead of listening to the first madman who tickles their ears, they might do a lot more for their wretched people. Your Liberators are even stupider than I suspected. Well," he concluded, lapsing into his usual practical tone, "you had better take a hot bath and go to bed. We can talk things over in the morning, when you've come to your senses. Don't try jumping out of the window, or any foolishness like that. You'll only break your neck if you do."

When the hapless Jamieson had departed, Marjorie stole up to Brassey.

"Do Mr. Vartan and Mr. Shane get their reward?"

"No," Vartan answered before Brassey could reply, and Shane echoed him.

"Why not?" Brassey demanded.

"We didn't bring you back that shovelful of black dirt."

"Yes, you did. You and Marjorie just destroyed it in the coals there."

"But Jamieson brought it," Vartan objected.

"Oh well, if you would prefer to have Jamieson collect the reward—"

"We're hanged if we do. All we stipulate is that Miss Driscott share equally. She brought Jamieson in."

"In that case," Brassey replied, "I shall be glad to increase the original amount by half."

THE END

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